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Dr. Narendra Dabholkar

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The New York Times (US)

Battling Superstition, Indian Paid With His Life

Manpreet Romana for The New York Times.

By ELLEN BARRY

Published: August 24, 2013

PUNE, India — For nearly three decades, an earnest man named Narendra Dabholkar traveled from village to village in India, waging a personal war against the spirit world.

Police officers removed a banner bearing the image of Narendra Dabholkar near the spot where he was shot in Pune, India.

If a holy man had electrified the public with his miracles, Dr. Dabholkar, a former physician, would duplicate the miracles and explain, step by step, how they were performed. If a sorcerer had amassed a fortune treating infertility, he would arrange a sting operation to unmask the man as a fraud. His goal was to drive a scientist's skepticism into the heart of India, a country still teeming with gurus, babas, astrologers, godmen and other mystical entrepreneurs.

That mission ended Tuesday, when two men ran up behind Dr. Dabholkar, 67, as he crossed a bridge, shot him at point-blank range, then jumped onto a motorbike and disappeared into the traffic coursing through this city.

Dr. Dabholkar's killing is the latest episode in a millenniums-old wrestling match between traditionalists and reformers in India. When detectives began putting together a list of Dr. Dabholkar's enemies, they found that it was long. He had received threats from Hindu far-right groups, been beaten by followers of angry gurus and challenged by councils upholding archaic caste laws. His home state, Maharashtra, was considering legislation he had promoted for 14 years, banning a list of practices like animal sacrifice, the magical treatment of snake bites and the sale of magic stones.

In the rush of emotion that followed Dr. Dabholkar's death, the state's governor on Saturday signed the so-called anti-black magic bill into force as an ordinance. But Dr. Dabholkar never put stock in sudden breakthroughs, said his son, Hamid Dabholkar, as mourners filtered through the family's home. "He knew this kind of battle is fought across the ages," he said. "The journey we have chosen is one that started with Copernicus. We have a very small life, of 70 to 80 years, and the kind of change we will see during that time will be small."

At Police Headquarters in Pune, the crime branch's reception area was decorated with a painting of the elephant-headed Hindu god Ganesh, bedecked with garlands of fresh flowers and a revolving, multicolored flashing light. There was a slight smell of incense. The lead investigator in the Dabholkar case had been working until 4 a.m., the inspector on duty said, so he would not be in until noon. "Round-the-clock," he repeated, reassuringly, when asked about the inquiry's intensity.

The killers left behind a few pieces of evidence. Surveillance cameras show two men lurking around a bridge for nearly an hour before intercepting Dr. Dabholkar on his post-yoga morning walk. Friends and family described threats Dr. Dabholkar had received over the years from hard-line Hindu organizations.

The founder of one such group, Sanatan Sanstha, noting that he did not condone the killing, did not bother to feign sorrow over Dr. Dabholkar's death.

"Instead of dying of old age, or by surgery, which causes a lot of suffering, the death Mr. Dabholkar got today was a blessing from God," the leader, a former hypnotherapist now known as His Holiness Dr. Jayant Athavale, wrote in an editorial in the organization's publication, Sanatan Prabhat.

With his unfashionable glasses and mild smile, Dr. Dabholkar fell into his region's tradition of progressive social movements. An atheist, he quit practicing medicine at 40 to devote his life to activism. The room where he worked was bare but for a framed quote from Mahatma Gandhi. His wife, Shaila, recalled that her family had offered her an array of young men they considered marriageable, and she had chosen him for his idealism.

"We thought only about society, and that was what we spoke about," she said. "Even though we were married, there was nothing like romance, or anything like that. Both of us were patriots of idealism. We wanted a good society."

He was active on many fronts, from women's rights to environmentalism, but the guru-busting received the most attention. A German scholar who wrote a book about Dr. Dabholkar's group, the Committee for the Eradication of Blind Faith, described a traveling road show in which activists lay on beds of nails, set coconuts on fire and told crowds, "Just remember, miracles can never happen."

"The rationalists do not shy away from challenging and provoking the gods, deities and spirits, ridiculing the people capable of controlling black magic and deliberately doing the most inauspicious things," the scholar, Johannes Quack, wrote in his study "Disenchanting India." "Some villagers told me that the rationalists would live to regret such behavior."

Recently, Dr. Dabholkar had focused much of his energy on the anti-black magic bill, and he was frustrated that politicians were slow to embrace it. Shruti Tambe, an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Pune, said it had run into various roadblocks — a rise in conservative thought among middle-class Hindus; the vested interests of castes that specialized in certain rituals. Then there was the difficulty of providing a legal definition of superstition. The list of banned activities grew shorter and shorter over the years, and now includes 16 items,

among them "to perform magical rites in the name of supernatural power" and "to perform so-called black magic and spread fear in society."

"What today stands as the draft legislation is a much mellowed-down position," she said. "It is a slippery area that we are talking about — what is faith, and what is blind faith. There is a very thin line dividing it."

Far-right Hindu groups were vehemently opposed. Shambhu S. Gaware, a spokesman for Sanatan Sanstha, who offered an interview after repeated phone calls, said early versions of the bill banned practices that cause bodily injury — which, he said, could be interpreted to include traditional fasting. Though many provisions have since been removed, the act is still vaguely worded and could be applied to legitimate religious practices, he said.

"This is just an attack on Hindu dharma," said Mr. Gaware, a mechanical engineer.

The days since the killing have been tense for Sanatan Sanstha. There have been calls to ban the group, which has no official membership, since 2008, when people linked to it were convicted of bombing theaters. Mr. Gaware said investigators questioned eight of Sanatan Sanstha's local members immediately after the killing, and have a list of 70 members they plan to interrogate. He said the members had cooperated fully.

"Dr. Dabholkar was not a believer in God, and we are strong believers in God, so there is always a clash between our thoughts," he said. "But we do not believe in violence. Whatever our differences with Dr. Dabholkar, we always choose legal means to oppose him."

The police have begun questioning the leaders of criminal gangs in Pune, in hopes of identifying the crime's mastermind, and are tracing more than 1,000 motorcycles with plate numbers similar to the assailants', The Times of India reported Saturday.

In Pune, meanwhile, the secular and the spiritual strain against each other. Boys and men stopped at the spot on the bridge where Dr. Dabholkar was shot, fixing their gaze at the grayish stain on the cement. Rohit Shindey, 21, said that as a child, he had believed in "all the things in our religion that they would do that was rubbish, like babas and predictions."

Then, he said, Dr. Dabholkar gave a speech at his school. "He told us: 'I am not saying there is no God. Believe in God. But do not keep any superstitions in your heart. Only God is in your heart,' " Mr. Shindey said.

Not 50 feet away, Kumar Shankar was offering palm readings in the same spot where he has worked since 1987. He sat cross-legged and barefoot, in a vest of rough homespun fabric, and was not especially bothered by the challenges of secularists. A reading was 60 rupees, about $1.

"The Constitution of India has given us freedom of expression," he said. "Many people say God is not there, but many more believe in God. Many people do not believe in spirits. Many people believe in spirits." To charges that he was exploiting that belief, he said, "If you go to a doctor, will he treat you for free?"

Mr. Shankar had heard about Dr. Dabholkar's death, and about the sudden progress of the new legislation. He shrugged off the idea that it would have any effect on him. "No, mine is a science," he said. "This is palmistry! Numerology, palmistry, astrology, these are sciences! The law cannot ban them."

Washington Post (US)

Indian scientists decry killing of anti-superstition activist as part of 'anti-science' trend

By Associated Press,August 21, 2013

NEW DELHI — The killing of an Indian crusader against superstition and religious charlatans prompted hundreds of protesters to shut down a city near Mumbai on Wednesday as a group of Indian scientists decried an "atmosphere of intolerance and anti-science attitude" that could undermine development.

Police were hunting for two unidentified men suspected of firing four shots at Narendra Dabholkar as he was taking a morning walk Tuesday in Pune. A witness reported seeing the assailants flee on a motorcycle. Police released a sketch of one suspect and said the two were believed to be in their 20s.

Dabholkar, a 67-year-old doctor-turned-activist, had been receiving death threats for years since he began traveling by public buses to hundreds of villages around Maharashtra state to lecture against superstitions, religious extremism, black magic and animal or human sacrifice, according to his friend and fellow activist, Deepak Girme.

"He wanted to expose the people who cheat the poor in the name of gods, who promise false cures for cancer or do black magic to perform so-called miracles," Girme said. "He would say he was a medical doctor but that superstition was a bigger disease causing a lot of harm, especially to the poor and the gullible."

Hundreds of students and activists marched through the streets of Pune to protest the killing. Some carried banners in the local Marathi language reading "You can kill a person with a bullet, but you can't kill his thoughts" and "We are all Dabholkar."

Dabholkar had refused to join any political party and, while Hindu by birth, eschewed its traditional teachings. Instead, he believed that the best people could do for society was to "live in harmony with each other and use your brain," Girme said.

Dabholkar's body was cremated Tuesday night in his home town of Satara, where he ran a clinic for alcoholics.

Responding to the public outcry, Maharashtra's government said it would pass long-stalled legislation that Dabholkar had worked on to ban religious exploitation and fraudulent medical workers. Activists and scientists urged the federal government also to pass a bill.

Girme said Dabholkar's organization, the Maharashtra Blind Faith Eradication Committee, would continue its work in lecturing about the benefits of scientific attitudes and social cooperation and lifting women up from religious subjugation.

Physicist Yash Pal, former chairman of the University Grants Commission, said that Dabholkar's killing amounts to an attack on reason and science and that India is jeopardizing its future by allowing superstition and fanaticism to grow.

Wall Street Journal (US)

Indian Rationalist Shot Dead

By Saptarishi Dutta and Ashutosh Joshi

Indian police are investigating the murder of a prominent campaigner for rationalism.

Pune's crime branch is investigating the murder of Narendra Dabholkar, an eminent Indian rationalist who was shot dead in the western Indian city Tuesday morning.

Mr. Dabholkar was killed by two gunmen when he was taking his morning walk, police said.

"Police [are] trying to ascertain the motorcycle and the assailants' details from CCTV camera footage in the vicinity," according to a statement released by the police. "We are investigating all angles in this case," Gulabrao Pol, Pune's police commissioner told India Real Time. "The Maharashtra government has announced a reward of one million rupees (US$15,625) for information on this case."

Mr. Dabholkar travelled extensively around Maharashtra giving lectures on rationalism and promoting scientific thought.

His lectures, however, didn't chime with Hindu hardliners, according to the members of his organization 'Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti,' the Maharashtra Committee for Eradication of Blind Faith, which he founded in 1989.

"I don't think the ploys of shutting down one voice will stop the progress of human beings," said Deepak J Girme, member of the committee, which is one of the most vocal proponents of a proposed law that aims to eradicate black magic and superstitious activities.

"Rationalism will prevail," Mr. Girme added.

Many of Mr. Dabholkar's supporters came to pay their last respects Tuesday at the Sadhana Media Center in Pune, the office of 'Sadhana' Weekly, a Marathi-language magazine promoting scientific thought which he edited.

His body has now been taken to his hometown of Satara, a district in Maharashtra for cremation, said Mr. Girme, who has been working with Mr. Dabholkar for around 17 years.

Mr. Dabholkar was a medical practitioner for 12 years before starting his work focused on the eradication of superstitions in India in 1983.

"This is a big loss for the [rationalist] movement," said Madhav Bagve, another member of the anti-superstition organization.

"They [killers] couldn't fight him with ideas," said Mr. Girme who described Mr. Dabholkar as a very "loving and caring" person.

In India, especially in areas with high levels of illiteracy, people are often highly superstitious. In Madhya Pradesh, a farmer bit and subsequently killed a snake that had bitten him. Some people in tribal areas believe that to be the cure for a snake bite.

Holy men in India often enjoy a cult following in the country.

Mr. Dabholkar wasn't against religion but he was against swindling in the name of god, said Mr. Girme.

In 2011, a 78-year-old black magic practitioner was arrested by the police after he robbed a woman after promising to cure white patches on her skin, according to a report in The Times of India.

The Maharashtra government has been debating the legislation against superstition for around 15 years but the act still hasn't been passed by the state assembly.

Mr. Dabholkar, along with his organization, had a major contribution in drafting the state anti-superstition and black magic bill, which was approved by the Maharashtra state cabinet nearly eight years ago, but the state government has yet to get the assembly's nod to convert it into a law.

The bill was opposed by some members of Warkari sect, a religious sect in Maharashtra and Sanatan Santha, an organization that works to spread information about Hindu religion and its practices, while political parties including Hindu nationalist Shiv Sena had expressed reservations about it. Abhay Vartak, a spokesman for the Sanatan Sanstha, said that this organization condemned the killing of Mr. Dabholkar.

"Our opposition to his thoughts, was an ideological one," Mr. Vartak said.

"We opposed the planned bill as it could hurt some of the traditional practices Hindu religion has followed over the years, while trying to do away with superstition and other things," he added.

Sanjay Raut, a Shiv Sena leader and a member of Rajya Sabha, the upper house of the parliament told reporters Tuesday that his party had a difference of opinion with Mr Dabholkar regarding the anti-superstition bill, but the party condemns his killing.

A Shiv Sena spokersperson couldn't be immediately reached directly for a comment.

Sharad Pawar, India's farm minister and former chief minister of Maharashtra, said "the killing of Dr Dabholkar, will not end the secular movement in Maharashtra."

The Economist (UK)

Atheism in India

He's not the son of God

Aug 22nd 2013, 13:23 by A.R. | DELHI

INDIA is so crammed with colourful "godmen", quacks hawking dodgy medicines and palmists to trace your fate, it is easy to miss the mild-mannered rationalists in the scrum. Extreme followers of Kali, the goddess of power, occasionally still leave a decapitated human sacrifice at one of her temples, provoking a storm of attention and debate. But when a group of unbelievers organised a "hug an atheist day" on June 7th nobody noticed.

It took the murder on August 20th of an anti-superstition campaigner to remind India of the lot of its faithless. Narendra Dabholkar was on a regular morning stroll, in Pune, Maharashtra, when a pair of hitmen parked their motorbike and shot him dead (mourners paid their respects in traditional fashion, pictured above). He had campaigned for 18 years against those who pretend to use, or offer protection from, the arts of black magic or

other religious or mystical harassment. He wanted a law to prosecute such con artists and to protect their victims from extortion and bullying.

A local sect and assorted Hindu right-wingers opposed his law, which Maharashtra's state government finally agreed to enact, in Mr Dabholkar's memory, on August 21st. He had received death threats before. The chief minister, Prithviraj Chavan, compared the killing of the rationalist to the murder of India's most revered figure, saying that "just as Gandhi was killed by those who could not digest his thoughts…[Mr Dabholkar] too was eliminated".

Who did so remains unclear, though the law he advocated must have threatened lucrative activity of various local groups. Indian atheists generally have an easier time than those elsewhere in South Asia. Prominent figures including the first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, and the current defence and home ministers, plus the chief minister of Karnataka state, are cheerily irreligious. Buddhists, Jains and many Hindus hold no particular belief in God. Humanist groups abound and the taboo against refusing to express religious belief is falling. A survey in May found 81% of Indians were religious, a fall from 87% in 2005.

Yet powerful groups remain to exploit superstition and religious fear. "Even now we have witch-hunting: people who are branded as witches and either killed or extorted for money", says Sumitra Padmanabhan, the editor of the *Freethinker*, a humanist magazine in Kolkata. She lists a baffling range of charlatans in the state of West Bengal: sellers of gemstones with supposedly therapeutic powers, providers of talismans and amulets, purveyors of cosmetics with magical properties.

She argues for a nationwide law along the lines of Mr Dabholkar's in Maharashtra. Without it, she says, going to the police does little good. Often "they believe in superstition too". Nor is education a simple cure. Even the most learned Indians will arrange a marriage, or pick a wedding date, only after consulting an astrologer.

Obituary

Narendra Dabholkar, fighter against superstition, was killed on August 20th, aged 67

Sep 14th 2013

WHEN the men on motorbikes shot him, four times in head, neck and chest, Narendra Dabholkar was crossing the bridge by the Omkareshwar temple in Pune, in western India. But he had no intention of offering a garland there, saying a prayer, pressing a coin in a priest's hand or adoring the *Shiva linga*. He did not believe in such behaviour. In fact, it appalled him; and he had hoped to spread his scepticism all through the state of Maharashtra.

He was a slight and courteous man, with unfashionable spectacles, in simple *khadi* shirt, slippers and cotton trousers: no one to notice on the street. Yet over three decades, ever since he had decided to switch his work from curing bodies to curing deluded minds, he had become famous. The organisation he had founded in 1989, the Committee for Eradication of Blind Faith (MANS in its Marathi acronym), had 180 branches in the state. In village after village he and his activists would confront the babas, sadhus and other "godmen" who preyed on the poor and simple, challenging their claims and reporting them to the police. He investigated and demystified cases of black magic and possession by ghosts; he campaigned against animal sacrifice, the prodigious waste of drinking water and good food during religious festivities, and the pollution of local rivers during Ganesha's birthday festival by the immersion of thousands of idols made of plaster of Paris.

In Kolhapur Dr Dabholkar exposed "Cowfly Baba", who gave false comfort to people for ten rupees a time by pretending to remove dirt and cowflies from their ears with a glass tube. He poured public scorn on Sathya Sai Baba, a millionaire godman who appeared to make holy ash, gold chains and Swiss watches appear from thin air. Dr Dabholkar also offered 21 lakh rupees (about $33,000) to any sorcerer who, under strict scientific conditions, could stay on fire for a minute without moving, duplicate a currency note, grow a severed limb two centimetres by the application of powder, or turn water into petrol. The sum remains unclaimed.

Much of the “black magic” he dealt with had simple, sad causes behind it. The wild, convulsing women in the temples of Ambabai and Dattatreya were not possessed, but were mentally ill, hysterical after years of poor food, risky births and mistreatment by their families. One case, where a family was petrified by halved lemons strewn outside the house, clothes torn and the milk spoilt with salt, was traced to a daughter-in-law whose husband would not take her to the movies. When the poor came to his “mobile science” vans, bringing their stories of terrifying horoscopes, Dr Dabholkar would hand them a telescope and patiently explain the profound indifference of the stars.

The only inexplicable thing, he would say (all other “inexplicable” things being rationally explained by natural laws) was that India in the 21st century was still so full of superstition. It launched its own satellites, but before a launch the gods would be invoked with flowers and sandalwood paste; its IT was the envy of the world, but even middle-class people would not start a new project on “inauspicious” Saturdays. The cult of the individual was gathering pace, but people still believed that their fates were in the hands of the gods, not themselves. They clung blindly to karma, which was a law for “sheep” and “slaves”.

Following Gandhi

With equal ferocity, he rejected India’s caste system. He himself was Brahmin, educated in elite schools, but with progressive parents. His social work had begun with a campaign to make villages have a single well for everyone, Dalits (then “untouchables”) and others alike. He continued in that vein by urging tolerance and protection for intercaste marriages.

His success rate, though, was slow. For 18 years he campaigned tirelessly for a law against black magic, but his bill was allowed to lapse until, on his death, a severely trimmed version was passed. Babas and politicians remained hand-in-glove. Hindu and right-wing rowdies tried to attack him in the villages; once he was doused with kerosene and almost set on fire. But Dr Dabholkar, a star player of *kabaddi* (team-wrestling) in his youth, laughed that he could take a tumble or two. He placed his hopes in the young, whose company he delighted in, and set up flourishing teacher-training programmes to encourage rational thinking in the schools.

He also taught by example. His life was pure and simple: vegetarianism, teetotalism, abstention from religious rites of any kind. Even his children were married without pomp or fanfare, in a ceremony that took an hour rather than several days. His office, from which he ran a weekly newspaper as well as MANS, was bare except for a quote from Gandhi on the wall. His reverence for the Mahatma underlined the fact that, though an atheist himself, his organisation was neutral on the subject of God’s existence. He valued the highest reaches of Indian spirituality. It was exploitation by conmen that he condemned.

Naturally, he was also dedicated to non-violence. His critics accused him of wanting to destroy all religion; but even its idols he treated with respect. There was no other way, he said. In this, as in human rationality, he had unshakeable belief. His enemies did not.

The Gaurdian (UK)

Indian anti-superstition activist Narendra Dabholkar shot dead

Campaigner who urged state of Maharashtra to pass anti-black magic bill killed by motorbike assailants in Pune

Narendra Dabholkar, above, reportedly infuriated some rightwing Hindus by his move to outlaw the practices of 'godmen'. Photograph: www.antisuperstition.org

A prominent campaigner against religious superstition has been shot and killed while out for a morning walk in the western Indian city of Pune.

Narendra Dabholkar was at the forefront of a long-running campaign to ban superstitious religious practices by getting the state of Maharashtra to pass an anti black-magic bill. He died on Tuesday after being shot by two gunmen riding a motorcycle.

Police said four shots were fired at Dabholkar from close range as the rider slowed behind him on a bridge near the Omkareshwar temple. A passerby noted the vehicle's number, but the killers have not yet been identified.

Dabholkar, who was 67, had infuriated some extremist Hindus with his campaign to outlaw the religious practices of some ascetics.

Many "godmen" claim to perform miracles so as to impress their devotees. They summon spirits, conjure up objects, provide talismans for curing ailments, walk on fire and pierce their tongues with steel skewers.

Dabholkar's anti-superstition organisation, the Maharashtra Blind Faith Eradication Committee, had offered a reward of 500,000 rupees (£5,035) to anyone claiming to be a spiritual diviner who could successfully summon spirits.

"What has happened is shocking. It is really shameful," said Vijaya Chauhan, an associate of Dabholkar. "The best way to pay homage to a man who had been campaigning relentlessly for the last 18 years for a law against superstitious religious practices is to immediately pass the bill in the state legislative assembly."

Rightwing Hindu politicians in the state were strongly opposed to the bill and even the ruling Congress party seemed to lack the political will to push ahead with the legislation, Chauhan said.

Besides lobbying in the legislature, Dabholkar's group was involved in a school outreach programme across Maharashtra, which seeks to encourage rational thought among students and expose religious charlatans.

Dabholkar was qualified as a doctor but gave up his profession to devote himself to the rationalist cause. He edited a weekly magazine and was closely associated with the founder of the Indian Rationalist Association, Sanal Edamaruku, who had to flee to Europe following death threats and blasphemy cases against him.

The state government has announced a reward of 1m rupees for information leading to the arrest of Dabholkar's killers.

BBC News (UK)

India anti-superstition campaigner Narendra Dabholkar shot dead

A high-profile Indian anti-superstition activist, who was campaigning for a law to ban black magic, has been shot dead in the city of Pune, police say.

Narendra Dabholkar, 71, was attacked by two gunmen on motorbikes while he was taking his morning walk.

He was known for founding the Committee for the Eradication of Blind Faith more than 20 years ago.

Critics accused him of being anti-religion in a country where mysticism and spirituality is venerated.

But in an interview with the Agence France-Presse news agency two years ago he rejected such charges.

"In the whole of the bill, there's not a single word about God or religion. Nothing like that. The Indian constitution allows freedom of worship and nobody can take that away," he said.

"This is about fraudulent and exploitative practices."

Mr Dabholkar and his committee (Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti) was particularly well-known for openly criticising some of India's so-called "godmen", the self-styled Hindu ascetics who claim to perform miracles and are revered by many. He also campaigned against animal sacrifices used in certain rituals.

The chief minister of Maharashtra state expressed his grief at the murder and announced a reward for any information.

Media reports say his killing comes days after the state government said it would introduce the controversial anti-superstition bill

Dawn (Pakistan)

India anti-superstition campaigner killed by gunmen

Founder of the Mahashtra Committee for the Eradication of Blind Faith, Narendra Dabholkar had faced accusations of being anti-religion after lobbying to pass legislation banning superstition and black magic.—Photo: AntiSuperstition.org

MUMBAI: A leading Indian rationalist thinker, who campaigned for a law to eradicate superstition in a country noted for its mystics and gurus, was shot dead on Tuesday.

Two gunmen on motorbikes fired at Narendra Dabholkar, a medical doctor who had faced accusations of being anti-religion, as he was taking his morning walk in the western city of Pune in Maharashtra state, its police chief said.

“He was shot dead this morning, our investigations are on,” Pune police commissioner Gulabrao Pol told AFP.

Pol said detectives were trying to establish the motive behind the killing and had no immediate suspects. “There has been no breakthrough so far, but we are working on all angles,” he said.

Dabholkar more than two decades ago founded the Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti – the Committee for the Eradication of Blind Faith – that aimed to change the mindset of India’s deeply superstitious population.

Dabholkar, known for his campaigns to promote progressive and scientific thought, had for several years been lobbying for Maharashtra state’s parliament to pass legislation banning superstition and black magic.

Two years ago, in an interview with AFP, he rejected critics’ charges that such a bill was anti-religion.

“In the whole of the bill, there’s not a single word about God or religion. Nothing like that. The Indian constitution allows freedom of worship and nobody can take that away,” he said. “This is about fraudulent and exploitative practices.”

Over the years, Dabholkar had also challenged some of India’s “godmen”, self-styled Hindu ascetics who have huge followings, over their claims to have performed miracles.

He also campaigned against animal sacrifices during some religious rituals.

Dabholkar, whom Indian media said was aged 71, was editor of a magazine called “Sadhana” or spiritual practice and was devoted to the propagation of progressive thought.

Prominent rationalist Sumitra Padmanabhan of the independent Humanists’ Association condemned the killing. “Rationalists all over India are attacked as India is still a very superstitious country,” Padmanabhan said by telephone from Kolkata.

“There are laws against dowry, witch-hunting and child marriages but such practices are still thriving in the country,” she told AFP.

“Scientists don’t fight with each other, rationalists also don’t – but in the name of religion there is conflict because people with extremist views are thriving in India because it is very regressive country.”

Gurus and spiritual leaders play an integral role in the daily lives of thousands of Indians seeking a pathway to happiness and enlightenment.

Superstitious beliefs are rampant in the fast-developing and officially secular country, where Hinduism dominates but a diverse range of ethnic groups and religious practices co-exist.

Maharashtra Home Minister R. R. Patil condemned the shooting and said those responsible would be brought to justice.

TNN

Last threat to Dabholkar: ‘Remember Gandhi’

Vivek Waghmode & Radheshyam Jadhav, TNN | Aug 21, 2013, 01.09 AM

Narendra Dabholkar, a leading anti-superstition campaigner, social worker and journalist, was gunned down by unidentified motorcycle-riding assailants.

PUNE: "Remember Gandhi. Remember what we did to him," was probably the last threat noted rationalist Narendra Dabholkar received from right-wing organizations opposed to the Maharashtra (eradication of black magic) bill. Dabholkar's Andrashradda Nirmulan Samiti (ANS) has been campaigning for the passage of the bill, which has been pending for 14 years now.

Dabholkar, who was shot dead here on Tuesday by unknown assailants, had referred to the threat while speaking to TOI last month. "I have been used to such threats since 1983," he had said. "But I'm fighting within the framework of the Constitution, and those opposing the bill should debate and discuss it as many times as they want. Only those who swindle the common people need to fear the bill. It has been pending in the state legislature for the last six sessions. Misguided forces keep raking up some issues and the government hesitates to approve the bill."

Dabholkar's family and friends said he had received frequent threats and was attacked many times with weapons and sticks. But he had refused to take police protection. Now, his followers and friends regret the threats were not taken seriously.

Veteran Communist leader Govindrao Pansare said the fight against superstition would continue. "Dabholkar's assassination is an indicator that there're fundamentalists and fascists among us who want to quell all rational voices with violence," he said. "He was a brave social crusader who was aware of the dangerous path he was treading. His fight against those who reap the socio-economic benefits of superstition will continue and we all vouch to strengthen his movement."

Pradip Patil, a Sangli-based ANS activist, recalled a couple of attacks on Dabholkar. "He and [the actor] Shriram Lagoo were attacked by a mob with sticks in Sangli in 1991," he said. "In 1994 he was attacked with weapons in Tasgaon (Sangli), the native place of home minister R R Patil. But Dabholkar refused to lodge a police complaint, saying he wanted to fight the battle with non-violence and within the framework of the Constitution."a

S M Mushrif, former inspector general of police, Maharashtra, said: "They (right-wing members) are committing offences and the state machinery is sitting helplessly. The state's probably scared to take action against them because they've penetrated all systems of power and governance."

Sham Manav, Dabholkar's one-time associate and anti-superstition activist, said he was attacked five years ago at a function at Balgandharva Rang Mandir here. "Police ignored the attack," he said. "We had then asked the state government to take serious cognizance of the threats and attacks on anti-superstition workers. But nothing happened and right-wing members continue to bully those who speak against them."

When Dabholkar's body was brought to the office of the newsweekly 'Sadhana', thousands of activists shouted slogans against right-wing organizations and demanded the government impose a ban on them.

"This is shocking," veteran activist Vilas Wagh said. "Pune, which boasts of the rational tradition of Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, has witnessed violence against rationalistic individuals even in the past. It's a cause for concern that fundamentalism has reached a level where people aren't even being allowed to air their views."

CM faces wrath in Satara

Maharashtra chief minister Prithviraj Chavan, who paid respects to activist Narendra Dabholkar in Satara, was confronted by the latter's angry supporters who shouted slogans against the state government and demanded the immediate approval of the Maharashtra (eradication of black magic) bill. In Pune too, activists shouted slogans against home minister R R Patil and demanded his resignation.

Crusader was agitated with CM's stand on pending bill

Radheshyam Jadhav, TNN | Aug 21, 2013, 12.51 AM IST

PUNE: Narendra Dabholkar had relentlessly and patiently campaigned against superstition for the last 14 years. But he was irked of late by the continued delay in getting the anti-superstition bill passed in the state assembly.

In fact, last month Dabholkar had squarely blamed chief minister Prithviraj Chavan for not making sincere efforts to approve the bill.

The state government had agreed to pass the Maharashtra Prevention and Eradication of Human Sacrifice and Other Inhuman, Evil and Aghori Practices and Black Magic Bill in the legislature. It was supposed to get the state's approval in the last state assembly session, but it was withheld after the warkari sect raised objections.

"Deputy chief minister Ajit Pawar has agreed to approve the bill. Now it is the will of chief minister Prithviraj Chavan that matters. If he really cares for the progressive state, he should not delay it," Dabholkar had said while speaking with TOI some days back.

"Only those who swindle common people need to fear this bill. It has been pending in the state legislature for the last six sessions. Every time some misguiding forces rake up some issues and the government hesitates to approve the bill. The warkari movement should not have misconceptions about the bill. The state has conducted four meetings with waqrkari leaders and 20 changes suggested by them have been made. Now there is no place for any complaints,"

Black magic casts a spell on Old City

Syed Mohammed, TNN May 16, 2013, 01.13AM IST

HYDERABAD: The Old City is under the spell of the black magicians or the neighbourhoodbaba, who in exchange for a few hundreds, promise 'patients' a life free of ailments. Some have even brazenly put up their pictures on banners, proclaiming themselves as 'rectifiers of marital discord'.

For instance Khaja Abdul Kalam (name changed), an NRI techie based out of Qatar, whose medical expenses incurred for treating his father have reached Rs 3 lakh in around two and a half years. Shockingly, it was not a medical practitioner who went smiling all the way to the bank, but a kohl-eyed 'aamil' who has been operating in Bahadurpura , fleecing many other gullible residents like Kalam's father. "Instead of spending money on medicines I have ended up paying money for musk, ink, paper and lot of trouble. The 'aamil' has fleeced my father and me to no end. He promises that all family and property disputes will be settled provided that he is informed of them," Kalam said.

Anti-superstition crusader Dabholkar shot dead

Mihir Tanksale, TNN | Aug 21, 2013, 01.15 AM IST

PUNE: Well-known rationalist and anti-superstition crusader Narendra Dabholkar was on Tuesday shot dead by two unidentified assailants while on a morning walk near Omkareshwar temple here. The 67-year-old activist was shot from close range and died on the spot.

Police said the assailants fired five bullets at him on Vitthal Ramji Shinde bridge around 7am at the end of his routine morning walk. Three bullets hit Dabholkar, one of them in the head.

A large number of social activists, writers and actors condemned the murder and demanded immediate arrest of the assailants and the mastermind. Besides Pune, rallies were taken out in Mumbai, Aurangabad, Nashik and Kolhapur in protest against the killing.

Calling it a "well-planned murder", chief minister Prithviraj Chavan said: "Those forces, which could not digest Gandhiji, have killed Dabholkar. The way Gandhiji's voice was silenced, the same has happened with Dabholkar."

"Remember Gandhi. Remember what we did to him" was the last threat that Dabholkar received from right-wing organizations, opposed to the Maharashtra (Eradication of Black Magic) Bill for which he had been relentlessly campaigning. He had been threatened by right-wing groups on several occasions.

State home minister RR Patil said several teams had been formed to track down the killers.

The assailants had brazenly parked their motorcycle outside the Shaniwar Peth police post, barely 30ft from the crime spot and fled towards Ramanbaug in Narayan Peth, driving through check posts near Omkareshwar temple.

An eyewitness, who saw the assailants from the balcony of his flat nearby, noted down the registration number of the bike, police said. He also told police that the killers were between 25 and 30 years of age. One was wearing a white shirt and a cap while the other was wearing a grey shirt. Based on his account, police released a sketch of one of the suspects.

"There were three bullet injuries — two on the chest and one on the forehead. One of the bullets went through his chest and got lodged in the right side of the neck. Another bullet fired on the temple above the right eye was found in the skull," said a doctor from Sassoon Hospital after the post mortem.

Some devotees, who heard the gunshots from the Omkareshwar temple, and a police inspector rushed to the bridge to find Dabholkar lying in a pool of blood.

Dabholkar was identified only after a senior police officer reached the spot and contacted Sadhana Media Centre.

After practising for 12 years as a doctor, Dabholkar had joined social activist Baba Adhav's 'One Village, One Well' movement before founding the Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmulan Samiti. He edited the Marathi weekly 'Sadhana'.

He was scheduled to address a press conference at 11.30am on Tuesday on eco-friendly immersion of idols during Ganeshotsav.

Joint commissioner of police Sanjeev Kumar Singhal said police have started probing uploading of Dabholkar's defaced photographs on the internet. "We were informed that some groups had uploaded these photographs on their websites. We will look into it," Singhal said.

A prolific speaker, writer and an international kabaddi player, Dabholkar was the youngest of ten siblings with six brothers and three sisters. His was a family of progressive thinkers. His father Achyut Dabholkar was a well-known lawyer while mother Tarabai was a rationalist.

His eldest brother, Dr Devdatta Dabholkar, a Gandhian and an educationist, was the former vice-chancellor of Pune University. Another brother, Professor Shripad Dabholkar, pioneered the organic farming movement in the state.

"My brother had been getting threat calls for many years, but he always took them lightly. He would say his activists would be killed if he accepted security. He also said he wanted to live on like Gandhiji even after death," said his third brother, Dr Dattaprasad Dabholkar, a scientist.

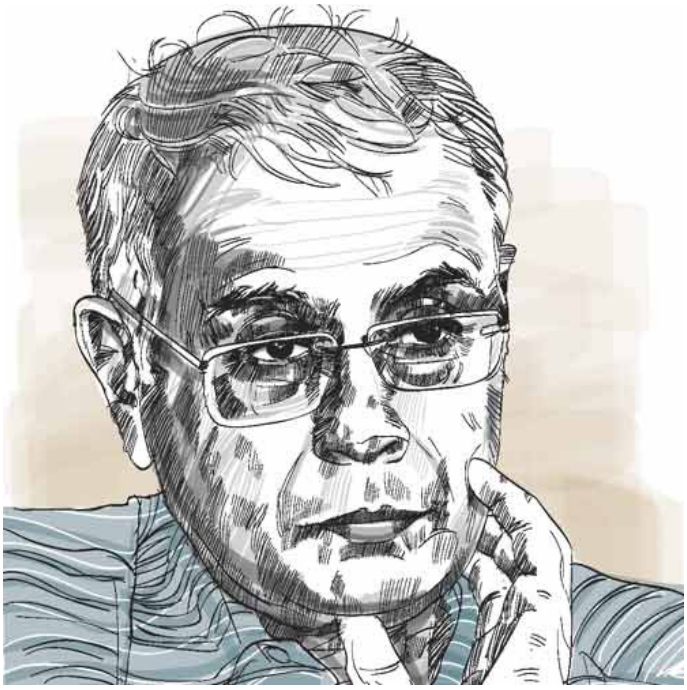
Dabholkar was cremated in Satara.

DNA

Satara loses its shining star - Narendra Dabholkar

Wednesday, Aug 21, 2013,

It was a moment that moved even the most steely minds in the crowd that had gathered to pay their tribute to slain social activist Dr Narendra Dabholkar. Octogenarian Babanrao Uthale came walking with a cane support and sat near his favourite pupil whom he had taught kabaddi — as he caressed Dr Dabholkar’s face that was disfigured by assailants’ bullets.



Dr Narendra Dabholkar, was given a teary farewell by his friends and followers in Satara later in the night. Chief minister Prithviraj Chavan, home minister RR Patil, their cabinet colleagues Harshwardhan Patil and Shashikant Shinde were amongst the dignitaries who came to pay their tributes to Dr Dabholkar. There were also PWP leader ND Patil, Comrade Govind Pansare amongst thousands who trickled to see off Dr Dabholkar on his final journey.

The crowds were silent and there were no slogans till the CM and RR Patil arrived at Shantiniketan where Dr Dabholkar's remains were kept for antyadarshan. But a weeping Andhshraddha Nirmoolan Samiti activist couldn't take it any more as RR Patil offered his respects and shouted, " Aaba, please call a special assembly session and pass the anti-superstition bill for which he fought all his life. That will be a real tribute." Neither Patil, nor the CM responded to the plea and walked to the house to meet Dabholkars family members. But the slogans returned once Chavan stepped out to leave. And the crowds insisted a fast probe as well as an immediate passing of the bill.

Dr Dabholkars family didn't want to speculate who could have been behind the killing. "He always received threats, physical and otherwise. It was routine for him. There have been several attacks on his life and the most frightening one was by Nirmaladevi supporters who had poured kerosene on him and were about to set him on fire. He spoke about it often,"said his brother Dattaprasad Dabolkar.

Chitra, wife of his nephew Prasanna spoke how he never lost his temper. "He was a different person at home. He was most attached to all our kids with whom he became a kid himself. One couldn't believe he is the same analytical serious persona you saw on television," she said.

Chitra said she wasn't aware if Dr Dabholkar had received any threats in the recent past. "He discussed all of it with his elder brother Devdutta who passed away a couple of years ago. But with my husband Prasanna and his son Hameed both of whom are psychiatrists he always discussed reasons why people turned superstitious," she remembered.

Amol Tambe, one of the officers posted at the site for maintaining peace, recalled how he met Dr Dabholkar only a month ago. "Everyone speaks of his work against superstitions. His work for dead fiction is even bigger. Our analysis tells us most crimes happen because of addiction. Dr Dabholkar had a wonderful chat with the D Ed college students. He has been doing it for the last 30 years. Imagine so many students who become teachers

getting this wonderful insight about addiction. They will then go and inspire their students. He was a rare man," he told Dabolkars activists.

There were several who could not attend Dabholkar's funeral. A condolence meet has been arranged Yashwant Rao Chavan College of Science in Satara on Wednesday at 5 pm.

PTI

Anti-superstition activist Dabholkar shot dead in Pune; CM, Pawar condemn killing

PTI Aug 20, 2013, 01.09 PM IST

Anti-superstition activist Narendra Dabholkar shot dead in Pune

PUNE: In a setback to the progressive movement in Maharashtra, leading anti-superstition activist Narendra Dabholkar was shot dead by two unidentified assailants while he was out on a morning walk on Tuesday.

Known for his over two-decade long campaign against outdated and inhuman social practices, Dabholkar was currently engaged in mobilising public opinion and holding discussions with Maharashtra government for passing an 'anti-superstition and black magic' law in the state legislature, opposed by certain sections of the society, including the Warkari sect.

69-year-old Dabholkar, who headed the 'Andhashraddha Nirluman Samiti' (anti-superstition movement), was out for a morning walk when two motorcycle-borne unidentified assailants fired two bullets from close range into his head from behind, police said quoting an eyewitness.

The offence took place on the bridge near Omkareshwar Temple in the city in the vicinity of 'Sadhana' magazine, which Dabholkar edited to propagate progressive thought to change social mindset.

Police said Dabholkar, who lay in a pool of blood on the bridge, was identified by a photo in his wallet and a cheque in the name of the Andhashraddha Nirmulan Samiti (ANS). He was taken to Sassoon Hospital where he succumbed to injuries.

Four bullets were fired at the activist out of which two were lodged in his head, police added.

For Dabholkar, who hailed from Satara, spreading scientific temper and eradicating superstitions and undesirable

rituals in the society was a lifelong mission which he carried with zest and rational thought, notwithstanding resistance from retrograde elements.

Maharashtra home minister R R Patil, expressing shock and grief, said he had instructed top police officials to get to the bottom of the reprehensible act and book the culprits using all their "investigative skills".

Pune Police commissioner Gulabrao Pol said the motive behind the murder was being investigated.

Prominent political leaders and social activists from the state including Union minister and NCP president Sharad Pawar condemned the killing of Dabholkar, describing him as a dedicated, selfless social activist who was committed to promote progressive thinking.

"The progressive thought for which Dabholkar gave his life, will not die in Maharashtra," Pawar said.

A pall of gloom descended on neighbouring Satara from where Dabholkar hailed as the news of his death spread.

State chief minister Prithviraj Chavan condemned the killing and announced a reward of Rs ten lakh to person giving information about the culprits who murdered Dabholkar.

Anti-superstition activist shot dead, Sharad Pawar condemn killing

PTI : Pune, Tue Aug 20 2013, 13:00 hrs

In a setback to the progressive movement in Maharashtra, leading anti-superstition activist Narendra Dabholkar was shot dead by two unidentified assailants while he was out on a morning walk here today.

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Four bullets were fired at the activist out of which two were lodged in his head, police added. For Dabholkar, who hailed from Satara, spreading scientific temper and eradicating superstitions and undesirable rituals in the society was a lifelong mission which he carried with zest and rational thought, not withstanding resistance from retrograde elements.

Maharashtra Home Minister R R Patil, expressing shock and grief, said he had instructed top police officials to get to the bottom of the reprehensible act and book the culprits using all their "investigative skills".

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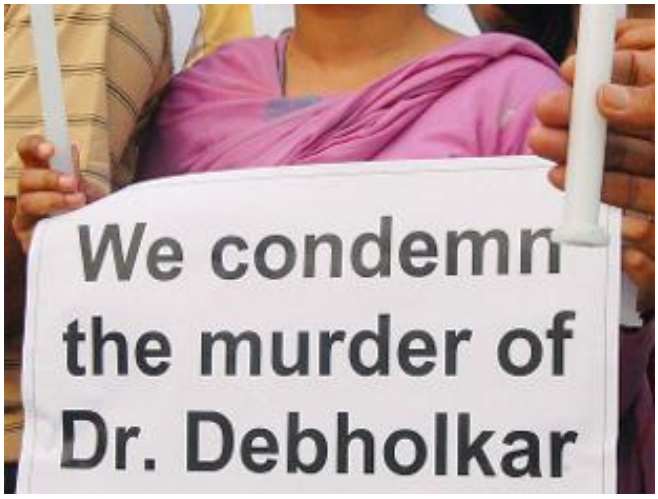
Dabholkar aides meet Rahul Gandhi for central anti-superstition law

By PTI | 18 Sep, 2013, 04.42PM IST



Narendra Dabholkar, who spearheaded the anti-superstition movement in Maharashtra and ANS founder president was killed by unidentified assailants in Pune on August 20.

NEW DELHI: In a bid to push for a central law on the lines of Maharashtra ordinance against superstition and black magic, associates of activist Narendra Dabholkar, who was the brain behind the measure, today met Rahul Gandhi.

"We pressed for two issues. One was for a country-level legislation against black magic and anti-superstition and second was for progress in Dr Narendra Dabholkar's murder case," said Dabholkar's daughter Mukta who was accompanied by other activists from Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti (ANS).

She said the Congress Vice President assured them all support for the cause.

"He (Gandhi) was more interested in knowing about the impact of superstition on women. He assured us his support for our cause," said Mukta.

Narendra Dabholkar, who spearheaded the anti-superstition movement in Maharashtra and was founder president of ANS, was killed by unidentified assailants in Pune on August 20. No arrests have been made in the case so far.

After his murder, the Maharashtra government passed the Maharashtra Prevention and Eradication of Human Sacrifices and other inhuman evil and aghori practices, black magic Ordinance, 2013.Dabholkar had drafted the anti-superstition Bill over a decade ago, but it had repeatedly failed to get through the state legislature.

Apart from Rahul Gandhi, the activists also met NCP president Sharad Pawar, Left leaders Prakash and Brinda Karat, Sitaram Yechury and A B Bardhan and former BJP president Nitin Gadkari.

"All assured their support for Maharashtra-like legislation in the country.

"We also met planning commission member Narendra Jadhav and Rajya Sabha MP Bhalchandra Mungekar. Jadhav assured us that he will raise the issue in the National Advisory Council, of which he is a member, and also present the case before chairperson Sonia Gandhi," Mukta added.

ANS executive president Avinash Patil said there has been a demand for a Maharashtra-like legislation from "rationalist groups" in Gujarat, Punjab, Haryana and Goa.

"The group would also be holding dharna in Pune on September 20 to protest the assassination of Dabholkar," Patil added.

Deccan Herald

Anti-superstition activist Narendra Dabholkar shot dead

Pune, Aug 20, 2013, (PTI)

Activist Narendra Dabholkar, who was in the forefront of a campaign to persuade Maharashtra government to pass an anti-superstition and black magic bill, was shot dead here this morning by unknown assailants.

Dabholkar was found dead in a pool of blood at Omkareshwar bridge of the city.
Dabholkar, who was also editor of "Sadhana" magazine devoted to propagation of progressive thought, succumbed to bullet injuries in the Sassoon Hospital here.

Pune Police Commissioner Gulabrao Pol, who confirmed Dabholkar's death, told PTI that police were investigating the motive but no suspects have so far been identified.

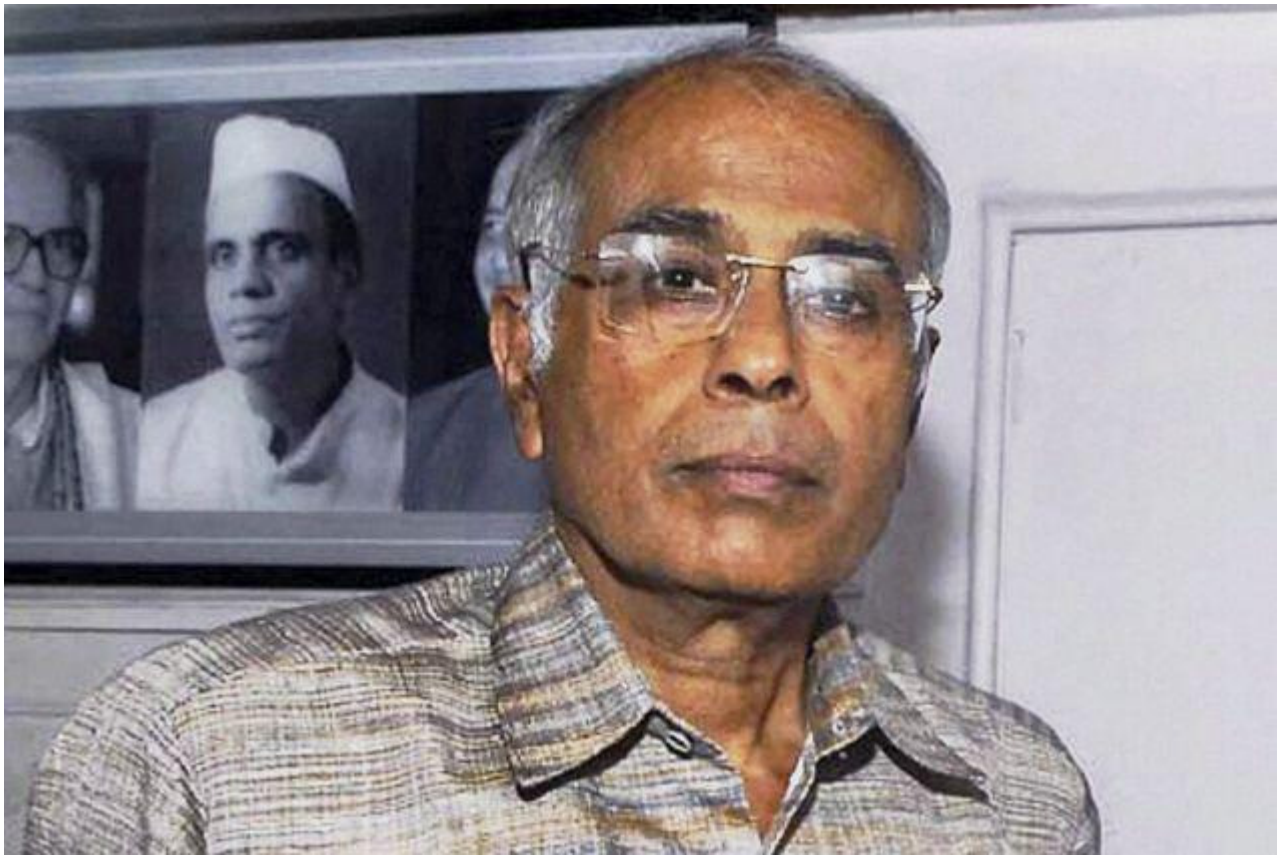
Dabholkar spearheaded the "Andhashraddha Nirmulan Samiti" (Anti-Superstition movement) to change social mindset and inculcate scientific temper.

A staunch fighter for the cause of eradication of inhuman rituals and superstitions, Dabholkar was also in the forefront of the campaign to persuade Maharashtra government to pass an anti-superstition and black magic bill ---- opposed by certain sections of Warkari sect -- in the State legislature.

The Hindu

Rationalist Dabholkar shot dead

Amruta Byatnal



PTI A file photo of president of Maharashtra anti-superstition association Narendra Dabholkar, who was shot dead in Pune on Tuesday.

Anti-superstition activist and Maharashtra's most vocal rationalist Dr. Narendra Dabholkar (65) was shot dead by two youth on a motorcycle on the Omkareshwar bridge near Pune's Shanivar Peth area while he was on a morning walk on Tuesday, Commissioner of Police of the city Gulabrao Pol said.

The gunmen fired three rounds and fled. Dabholkar received one bullet in the head and died instantly. He is survived by his wife Dr. Shaila Dabholkar, son Hamid and daughter Mukta.

News of the killing sparked protests in Pune, Dabholkar's hometown Satara and several other parts of the State. When Chief Minister Prithviraj Chavan arrived in Satara for the funeral, he was heckled by activists from Dabholkar's movement. They demanded that the State pass the anti-superstition Bill that Dr. Dabholkar had been campaigning for.

An all-party bandh has been called in Pune on Wednesday in protest against the killing.

The police said it was a planned murder since Dr. Dabholkar was known to be in Pune only on Mondays and Tuesdays. The police said they had not received any complaints from him about threats.

His family said he received threats often but refused to ask for police protection. “He thought this was a struggle to end ignorance, and he did not need weapons to fight it,” said his son.

The police have released a sketch of one of the alleged killers and are examining CCTV footage from... the area. “We will look at all the angles, but no motive has emerged yet. Eight units of the Crime Branch have been formed for probe,” said Joint Police Commissioner Sanjeev Singhal. The police said they would also scrutinise allegations that he had received threats from extremist groups such as Sanatan Prabhat and Hindu Janajagruti Samiti. The Samiti has issued a press statement condemning the killing.

Dr. Dabholkar’s associates say right-wing groups had often threatened to disrupt his press conferences. “The police should have paid heed to this,” said Shyam Manav of the All India Andhashraddha Nirmulan Samiti, with whom Dr. Dabholkar once worked.

Dr. Dabholkar, a medical doctor, turned to social work more than two decades ago. In 1989, he set up the Maharashtra Andhrashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti to help eradicate superstition. His State-wide movement targeted godmen and superstitious practices. In recent years, he worked towards getting an anti-superstition Bill passed by the Maharashtra Assembly, but did not meet with much success. Several groups are demanding that the bill be passed to honour his memory.

Activists say the killing is a blow to the movement. “This is an attempt to suppress a democratic movement. It’s an attack on the Constitution, which asks its citizens to promote scientific temper,” said Vivek Monteiro of the All India People’s Science Network.

Dr. Dabholkar was slated to hold a press conference on Tuesday afternoon to encourage the use of eco-friendly Ganesh idols for the coming festival. “The only tribute to Dr. Dabholkar will be to continue his work,” said Kumar Saptarishi from rationalist movement Yukrand.

India: Sorry doctor, we didn’t deserve you |

Sandhya Gokhale and
Amol Palekar

Dabholkar’s anti-superstition war demanded a level of introspection of which we are incapable

In December 2003, Pune’s Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute was vandalized by 150 attackers destroying irreplaceable manuscripts. Why? Because the Institute’s staff provided some research material to Dr. James Laine whose claims about Shivaji “hurt their sentiments”.

Let’s look at a snapshot of Pune in these 10 years: hate crime and religious fanaticism on the rise; mushrooming deemed universities churning out mediocrity; municipal corporators mastering the art of fistfights while we excel in using more and more refined ways of bribing our bureaucrats and evading taxes; even red lights at traffic junctions are ignored. On January 13, 2010, RTI activist Satish Shetty was assassinated in Talegaon, about 40 km away from Pune. In the same year, out of nine social activists killed all over India, five were murdered in the areas neighbouring Pune. While this escalating violence is manifest in our daily routine, what is worse is the diminishing tolerance for each other’s thoughts, the apathy of the intelligentsia and the unabashed acceptance of helplessness.

So why are we all crying over Dr. Narendra Dabholkar's assassination? The shameful words expressed in the editorial of Sanatan Prabhat, just the day after Dr. Dabholkar's brutal assassination — "one gets what one deserves" — are actually applicable to all of us. Sorry Doctor, but we did not deserve a maverick like you.

Nine years before the time slice that we just saw, Dr. Dabholkar — the most humble crusader striving for eradication of blind faith, a radiant rationalist and an articulate man of incessant faith in human values — was relentlessly trying to have a rational dialogue with those saying no to a proposed anti-witchcraft Bill. And thirty years before this time slice, he had waged a war against exploitation of victims of superstitions at the hands of fraud babas, tantric-mantriks and self-proclaimed godmen.

Dr. Dabholkar's war was non-violent. But the sharpness of his words, thoughts and deeds were so supremely powerful and unbearable as to have invoked the despicable brutality that martyred him. His conviction and articulation made most politicians uncomfortable. Unlike many other intellectuals, Doctor was also an activist. He had the vision and capability to lead a grassroots-level mass movement. His personal rapport with thousands of activists across rural Maharashtra was unparalleled. His 15-year contribution as an editor of the 66-year-old weekly Sadhana resulted in a substantial increase in its subscribers.

Still with all these credits, his movement was restricted to lakhs, not crores. His two decade-long call could not gather the popular momentum that Anna Hazare managed in a few months. Why didn't we see crores of young people following Dr. Dabholkar, in the way we saw them come out in support of Nirbhaya?

Let's think of the 'we'-centric reasons behind this.

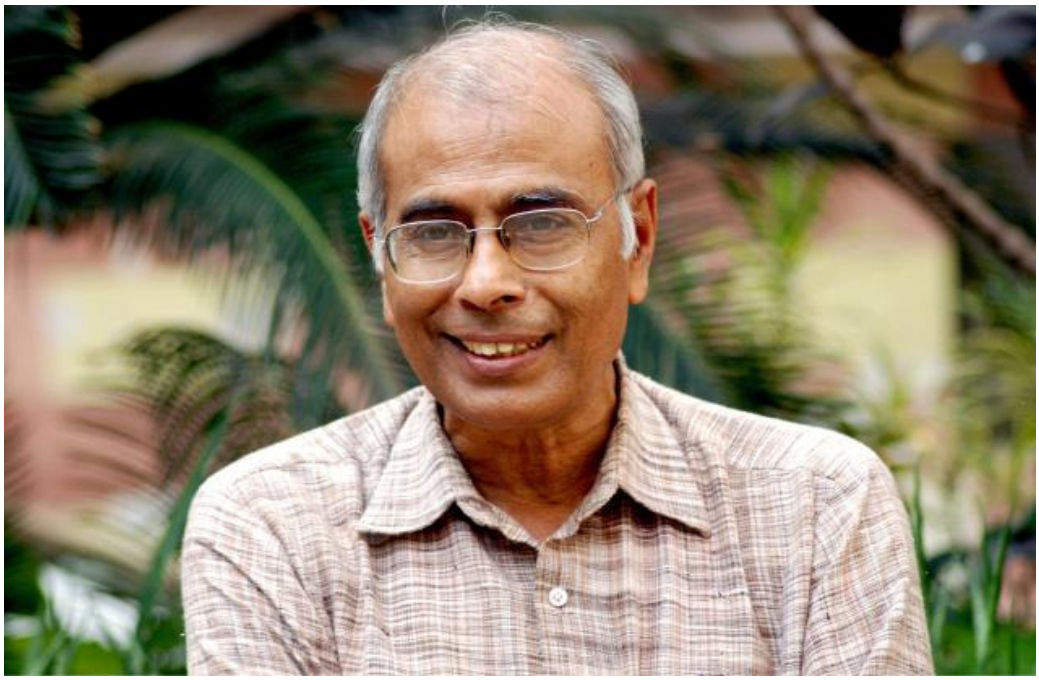
Dr. Dabholkar's campaign against superstition and inhuman rituals needed a certain level of intellectual introspection. It compelled us to check our position on an abstract concept like faith as opposed to concrete issues like corruption and rape. By ourselves, we do not think there is darkness in our beliefs and thoughts that need to be eradicated. We are just not used to such intellectual abstraction and lack the discipline to challenge our own 'faith'. Do we realise that many of those young protesters are queuing up for darshan in front of Saturn temples on Saturdays, Sidhdhivinayaks on Tuesdays and Datta temples on Thursdays? Do we get disturbed seeing more youth becoming religious? Do we even observe that most of our neighbours have some spiritual gurus/matas from whom they seek solace? Do we question in our own minds (let alone challenge it publicly) the sponsored, vulgar celebrations on the occasions of Dahi hundi, Ganeshotsav, or Navratri? Do we frown to see our friends' fingers being adorned with astro-crystals and gemstone rings prescribed by astrologers and godmen? Are we ready to accept that religion and practicing rituals are proving to be our cumulative catharsis? Actually, Dr. Dabholkar did not ever challenge our faith and religious belief. He merely challenged the superstitious practices and unscientific claims of godmen. Yet we simplistically labelled him as anti-Hindu. We did not even attempt to understand the provisions of the Bill proposed by him. If we do not find anything objectionable in scientists like Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam or icons like Sachin Tendulkar visiting a "miracle man", why should we expect the media to engage in an enlightened debate on the bill proposed by Dr. Dabholkar?

Sorry Dr. Dabholkar, we failed you! We are ashamed that we may fail to find your assassins! We are ashamed that we will move on expediently! We are ashamed that we are lethargic bystanders of the present! Sorry Doctor, we never deserved you!

(Sandhya Gokhale is a social activist; Amol Palekar is a filmmaker and actor.)

National anti-black magic bill required: Dabholkar's daughter

PTI



Activist Narendra Dabholkar. "We want a similar legislation on anti-superstition and black magic, the way it exists in Maharashtra," Mukta, daughter of Dr Narendra Dabholkar, who was killed by unidentified assailants in Pune last month, told reporters on Monday

The Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti is pressing for a country-level legislation against superstition and black magic on the lines of the Act in Maharashtra.

"We want a similar legislation on anti-superstition and black magic, the way it exists in Maharashtra," Mukta, daughter of Dr Narendra Dabholkar, who was killed by unidentified assailants in Pune last month, told reporters on Monday.

Ms. Mukta and some ANS activists are here to press for the legislation and would be meeting leaders from different political parties. They said they intend to meet Congress vice-president Rahul Gandhi and CPI(M) leaders Mr. Prakash Karat and Mr. Sitaram Yechury over the issue.

"Anti-superstition is not restricted to Maharashtra alone. Due to low literacy level and lack of health services, the level of anti-superstition is higher in other states. If there is a country-wide legislation, more people could benefit from this," ANS executive president Avinash Patil said.

Days after the assassination of Dabholkar, the Maharashtra government passed the Maharashtra Prevention and Eradication of Human Sacrifices and other inhuman evil and aghori practices, black magic Ordinance, 2013.

The ANS activists expressed anguish over the progress of investigations in Dabholkar's murder case. "Its been a month after Dr Dabholkar was assassinated and there has been no arrest, so there is lot of anxiety over what is happening," Ms. Mukta said.

Asked whether ANS has demanded a CBI probe into the murder, she said, "We have not asked for a probe by any other agency. The Maharashtra police is investigating the case and we hope they arrest the culprits soon."

Tehalka

Narendra Dabholkar: The relentless rationalist

Kumar Ketkar

Narendra Dabholkar was a maverick and yet very sensible. Mavericks generally tend to be indifferent to others, self-centered and haughty, but Narendra redefined these maverick attributes. Nevertheless, there were many contradictions in his personality which cannot be explained logically or psychologically.

He enjoyed confrontation, but sought compromise and reconciliation. Non-violent in his approach, he had a violent death. He believed in dialogue and was sober during arguments, but his opponents were shrill and abusive. He advocated scientific thinking, but was a strict vegetarian (and a teetotaler). He was a socialist, but not a Marxist. He was an extremely disciplined person and any old-style proud Sangh *swayamsevak* would envy him for that. A medical doctor, he participated in social movements. He was a fellow traveller of the Yuvak Kranti Dal, but never a direct activist. Although he was influenced by the JP movement, he remained outside Janata Party politics.

But what is important to note is that his life as well as his brutal death have completely exposed the hypocrisy and vacuousness of Maharashtra's claim to be progressive and modern. Indeed, his murder has shaken the establishment to the core, much more than his lifelong struggle to eradicate superstitions from society. For more than forty years, he worked to build the organization *Andhashradha Nirmulan Samiti* (Association to Abolish Superstition) and established a network of thousands of activists across Maharashtra – rural and urban. He had collected evidence on how thousands of women were victims of superstition and were exploited by sadhus, babas and self-proclaimed *tantriks* and *mantriks*. For him, therefore, it was also a struggle to liberate women from the shackles of vicious traditions, rituals and magic. Not only from the so-called gurus, but also from the male members of their families.

In rural Mahrashtra, humans were sacrificed as offerings for which women and children were burnt and killed. Their overall number may not be too large, but the impact of those practices was surely huge. What alarmed Dabholkar was the fact that politicians from all parties patronised these 'saints', advised them on their political fortunes, performed *tantra* to either help them become a minister or defeat/destroy a rival.

The Congress in Maharashtra proudly says that their politics inherits the values and ideals of Mahatma Phule, Shahu Maharaj and Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. However, the Congress – and in fact, all parties – know the impact this trio has on rural masses in the state. To get votes from the *bahujan* of Maharashtra, the Congress

uses their names and legacies profusely and says that they want to recreate Maharashtra in their utopian image. [For those not familiar with them, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule was a revolutionary social reformer in the mid-nineteenth century who, with his wife Savitri Phule, started campaigns for women's education, for the eradication of untouchability, to abolish caste hierarchies, to get rid of superstition and to educate people and teach them English. Though *mali* (gardener) by caste – in today's parlance, OBC – he was a profound social thinker and had even dedicated his book to Abraham Lincoln. Mahatma Phule was an inspirational force for Shahu Maharaj, Sayajirao Gaikwad of Baroda and Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar.]

While the Congress used to feel embarrassed by the campaigns run by Narendra Dabholkar as their sham claims would get exposed, the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Shiv Sena felt threatened because they felt that the movement was against Hindu traditions. The militant wings of the Sangh Parivar aggressively organised against Dabholkar's movement. Not only the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and the Bajarang Dal, but also more vicious outfits like Sanatan Sanstha and their ilk. Their publications routinely abused, threatened and spread calumny against Dabholkar's organisation and volunteers. But to their dismay, Dabholkar's reach was expanding and gaining strength. The more support he received from the masses, intellectuals and the media, the more shrill and violent became the obscene campaign of the Sanatan outfits. Just a fortnight before he was killed, some of their activists openly said that Dabholkar would meet the same fate as Gandhi. Social media websites were aflame with vulgar abuses and innuendo against Dabholkar – before his death and even after.

I have known Narendra for nearly forty years and I used to attend, participate and campaign for the ideas that he and his organization used to spread. He was extremely disciplined and was fastidious about time-management. He was always meticulous in his work – from organizing demonstrations and performances exposing so-called magic and *tantra* to preparing legislative drafts. He had colleagues and comrades, not 'followers'. His discussions with volunteers used to be open sessions. They would relate terrifying tales from their villages – which even the police were not aware of or had often connived in.

Every time he exposed the exploitation of poor villagers, there would be some sadhu or thug sanyasi protected or sponsored by a politician involved. While the BJP and the Sangh Parivar opposed him ideologically and politically, the Congress 'welcomed' his campaign publicly, but did nothing to enact laws to stop these atrocities. For nearly two decades, Dabholkar fought for strict laws against inhuman practices in the name of spirituality and Hindu traditions. The Congress and the Rashtravadi Congress promised him legislation against superstitious practices and made him amend the draft he had prepared, but then talked of legislative difficulties and shelved the draft bill. On one hand, they were afraid of losing the so-called 'traditional Hindu vote' and on the other, they themselves were superstitious. So they talked of not 'hurting the sentiments' of people and procrastinated.

The bill was finally ready, but it was not likely to be passed. So Dabholkar began his meetings with individual members of the House, party leaders, the media and opinion makers. His efforts had an impact and that is what alarmed the Sangh-Sanatan Parivar. His murder was the logical and ideological culmination – conspired, coordinated and executed in the same way Gandhiji was killed. Nathuram Godse belonged to Pune; 65 years later Narendra Dabholkar was assassinated in Pune

Hindu Business line

Rationalist Narendra Dabholkar shot dead

Alka Kshirsagar

Pune, Aug 20:

Narendra Dabholkar, rationalist and a staunch crusader against superstition, was shot dead by unknown assailants early this morning in Pune. No arrests have been made so far.

The social activist, who was killed on Omkareshwar bridge while on his morning walk, was the founder of the Andhshraddha Nirmulan Samiti, an organisation that spearheaded a movement against blind faith and superstition.

He was also at the forefront of a campaign to persuade the Maharashtra Government to pass an anti-superstition and black magic Bill and edited *Sadhana*, a magazine devoted for eradicating blind faith and propagating progressive thinking.

Dabholkar was shot in the head by assailants on a motorcycle at around 7.15 a.m.. He was found in a pool of blood on the bridge and succumbed to his injuries at the Sasson Hospital.

The Maharashtra Government has declared a reward of Rs 10 lakh for any information on the assailants.

Countercurrents.org

Dabholkar Is Done A Gandhi

Anand Teltumbde

"You never see animals going through the absurd and often horrible fooleries of magic and religion. . . . Only man behaves with such gratuitous folly." **? Aldous Huxley**

Maharashtra had one more shame added to a long list of shames it accumulated through history. On 20 August it killed Dr Narendra Dabholkar, a committed rationalist who had personified the struggle against superstition and humbug that exists in the state, which never tires calling itself progressive and claiming the legacy of Phule and Ambedkar. It comfortably forgets that the objective facts completely contradict this claim. It is the state that abused Savitribai and Jotiba Phule, humiliated Dr Ambedkar, begot the poisonous outfits like Rashtriya Swanyamsevak Sangh, the Hindu Mahasabha, the Samarasata Manch and innumerable such others; it contributed staunch social reactionaries that culminated in making of Nathuram Godse who gunned down Gandhi, that trend extends down to Abhinav Bharat in the twenty first century that is credited with masterminding and executing a series of terrorist acts. It has a unique distinction of having had a Brahmanist regime in history that tied a pot round the neck and a broom to the behind of Dalits. It still contributes significantly to the national statistics of atrocities against Dalits with shameful markers like Khairlanji. It does not realize that it is because of its deep drawn reactionary character Phule and Ambedkar had to take birth on its land. It is abiding shame that while it flaunts them as its ideals, it continues with its reaction and keeps on killing its progressive sons and daughters like Narendra Dabholkar.

Dr Dabholkar was not a kind of person who would provoke one to commit his murder. After practicing his medical profession for little over a decade, he devoted himself to the task of removing superstitions from the society under the aegis of the *Maharashtra Andha Shraddha Nirmulan Samitii* (Maharashtra Blind Faith Eradication Committee), of which he was the founder president. He always emphasized that he was not against any faith but the superstitions practiced in the name of faith. He wrote books and edited the well known magazine *Sadhana* started by a legendary socialist Sane Guruji. He was a liberal who avoided extremity in thought and action but remained resolute about his mission. A man of integrity, he toured all over the state addressing people and conducting workshops for youth educating them against the evil of superstitions with missionary zeal. He spoke unsparingly against the *buwa* s (mendicants claiming to perform miracles) and other practitioners of black magic who cheated and defrauded people of their hard earned monies. While many of them were in a petty category living off the offerings from people, some were bigwigs like Asaram Bapu and Nirmal Baba and others of their ilk, who had huge following and huge wealth. Their programmes are beamed on our national television channels across the country. And of course behind them are the institutions of Hindu Rashtra, the strategic multi-fanged outfits of the Sangh Pariwar, with their mighty propagandist infrastructure comprising websites, electronic media and multi-lingual press.

An uncompromising rationalist Dabholkar was against castes. He had taken part in agitations like the movement protesting for the equality of Dalits , against caste discrimination , atrocities and naming the Marathwada University after Babasaheb Ambedkar . He had recently come out in open heavily against it in a case of honour killing in Nashik. The shocking case related with a father belonging to Joshi – a nomadic tribe (NT) (it shows, in plains the tribes have been fully casteized), killing his nine-month pregnant daughter for marrying out of the caste at the instance of the caste *panchayat* (a governing council of caste). The evil practice was exposed by a letter written by one Anna Hingmire, also of the Joshi caste, to the police commissioner on July 3, 2013, complaining against the Jat Panchayat of his caste for harassing him and his family as his daughter had married a boy of another caste. No one would have had any inkling about this heinous practice all these years if this murder and subsequent investigation had not exposed it. It is not a matter of a particular caste; the caste panchayats have always been operational in some form of the other in every caste with varying degree of power. There has been notable resurgence in them during the last two decades of globalization, not only in the Jatland of Haryana or Hindi heartland of UP and Bihar but also elsewhere and surely in Phule-Ambedkar's Maharashtra. It was natural that Dr Dabholkar, of all the progressively people, came vehemently against it.

Naturally, he was targeted by the orthodox elements. The Hindu Sanatan Sanstha (organization of the orthodox Hindus), along with the entire Sangh Pariwar with its extensions like Shiv Sena, and of course the persons and establishments which thrived on the gullibility of people were against him. The Hindu Sanatan Sanstha has been in forefront in this virulent opposition. It carried a tirade against him in its organ called Sanatan Prabhat, published in many languages. This paper had not only written venomously against Dabholkar but also prominently published Dabholkar's photo crossing it with bold red, signifying his imminent elimination. What could be the more direct threat than this! It has never hidden its hatred for Dabholkar even in the wake of his murder. Just the next day (21 August) when the entire state was struck with shock and grief, it commented in its organ that it was the grace of god that Dabholkar met with such a death. Invoking Gita, it wrote, “one who is born is sure to die; the birth and death are according to one's destiny. Everybody gets the fruit of his *karma* (actions). Instead of dying of illness in a bedridden state or dying a painful death after an operation, the death Dabholkar met with was a grace of god.” In a press conference held in Mumbai by the Sanatan Sanstha to declare that it did not have any connection with the murder, its spokespersons were absolutely unapologetic and unrepentant about Dabholkar's death. These worthies, on the contrary declared that they would publish many more photos with red cross as Dabholar's, directly implying that they would carry out elimination of many people who walk the path Dabholkar did. Sanatan Prabhat carried an illustration showing a mighty elephant representing the Sanatan Sanstha marching ahead ignoring a fellow representing its opposition. It exhorted its readers to stop those who are heaping accusations on the religion-loving Sanatanis.

The other group opposed to Dabholkar comprised all those who had made exploiting gullibility of masses as their profession. It included quasi-begging pedestrians ranging from jogis and joginis who carried gods and goddesses on their heads and asked offerings from people to fortune foretellers, who sold their service at paltry fees. But it also included individuals like Asaram Bapus and Nirmal Babas, who have effectively institutionalized themselves into a big business. They have huge following, money and protection from powerful. They address their followers on several television channels across the country. For instance, Nirmal baba whom Dabholkar had taken on recently, (see his speech: Nirmal Baba: *Shodh ani Bodh* (Nirmal Baba: Enquiry and Lessons) on YouTube) ran his paid programme, *Nirmal Darbar* broadcast by approximately 40 different television channels including such biggies as AXN, TV Asia, Star News, SAB TV selling people divine ‘ *kripa* ' (blessings) as antidote or solution to their problems. His *Samagam* meetings had tickets for Rs. 2000 . Most of these Babas having dubious histories were caught many times with criminal acts ranging from defrauding people to sexual misconduct with their female followers (as I write, Asaram is being accused by a 16-year old girl of raping her) but such is their power that they are rarely touched. Not many people could muster courage to speak against them, leave apart carrying a public campaign obviously for the fear of consequences. Everyone knew that these Babas could go to any extent, murder being the minor matter, to save their thriving empire of billions. Dabholkar, in his imitable way dared them.

Dabholkar wanted an Act –Maharashtra *Andhashraddha Nirmulan* Bill (Eradication of superstitions Bill) be passed and accordingly submitted a draft created by him in the late 1990s. The bill has had a controversial history and has gone through several drafts and 29 amendments in the last decade. It was first put up before the

cabinet for discussion in 2003 and after its nod, was tabled in the Assembly in April 2005. It was surprisingly opposed by the treasury benches itself. After diluting some of its provisions as indicated by the Assembly and by the discussions with more than 100 MLAs, the revised draft was tabled again to the state Assembly, which now passed it but it got stuck in the Legislative Council. The latter decided to send it to the joint select committee, which held four meetings and invited suggestions and objections from the public. A whopping 1.17 lakh responses were received; 38887 against and 78869 in favour. Since the government was dissolved after the 2009 elections, the bill had lapsed and had to be again put up before the cabinet in July 2011, now in a substantially diluted form. After the cabinet clearance it was tabled before the Assembly in August this year and had not yet come for the discussion. In process, the original Andhashraddha Nirmulan Bill has become the *Anti-Jaadu Tona* Bill (Anti-Black Magic Bill) after providing for all kinds of misgivings of opponents, but still it was opposed by the Hindu extremist organizations across the board and the warkari sect (reportedly as incited by the Hindutva forces), which feared that it would adversely impact their religious customs and traditions. While Dabholkar allayed these fears by saying that there was not a single word about God or religion in the entire bill; the freedom of worship or practicing religion could not be taken away by anyone as they were enshrined in the Indian Constitution, no such rationale would work with the extremist elements that bayed only for his blood.

There has been a massive turn out of people in protest all over Maharashtra against this ghastly murder. People at many places booed away politicians and even heckled the chief Minister, Prithwiraj Chavan when he customarily went to pay homage to Dabholkar at his home in Satara. People demanded the bill for which Dabholkar struggled for 18 long years be passed immediately. As a damage control exercise, the government decided to take out an Anti-Jaadu Tona ordinance to enforce the provisions of the bill. The ordinance has always been the easy way in our democracy but when it comes for ratification before the Assembly, it is unlikely that it would be passed as hinted by the BJP, which expressed its opposition to the ordinance even in the heat of the moment. The opponents like Hindu Janajagruti Samiti and Sanatan Sansthan argue that the existing laws are adequate for taking action against the offences listed in the bill. Another argument they make is that the number of superstitions-related crimes committed is minimal and proudly cite that during the last five years, only 17 cases were registered in Mumbai. These arguments themselves indicate the need for a special Act to tackle these peculiar crimes which tend to filter out of the IPC net.

Who killed Dr Narendra Dabholkar may remain possibly an unsolved riddle like who killed Hemant Karkare and like rather numerous other such earlier cases despite the Maharashtra government exhibiting its keenness in this case to catch the culprits by announcing a Rs 10 lakh prize to anyone who provides information on them. As I write more than 24 hours have already passed and there is no clue to the police as to who killed him. Aren't there really any clue? Even a casual reader of this article can get sufficient clue as to who are behind the culprits. The finger behind the trigger might belong to anyone, but there is not much doubt whose brain has been behind it. Can the people who have directly crossed his picture in public view implying his imminent elimination not be the suspects? Can Nirmal Baba or Asaram Bapu or any such bigwig against whom Dabholkar spoke not be the possible subjects for interrogation? Can the Jat Panchayat kingpins not be in the eye of suspicion? No murder investigation may be as lucky as to have as few and concrete clues as in this case. In any other case, the police would have rounded up all kinds of people, thrashed them and extracted leads in process. Imagine, for instance some Hindu Baba was killed. Without even batting an eyelid, police would round up dozens of Muslim boys and unleash horror on them. Even in this case they might get some Sayed or Bashir as the ones who pulled the trigger on Dabholkar.

Dr Narendra Dabholkar, as I personally knew him, was a clear-headed person who knew what he was doing. He had set a modest goal for himslef, to make the society superstition free and imbibe scientific outlook, which he considered prerequisite for any radical change. He pursued it with exemplary commitment and zeal. To my misgivings that there was only a thin line difference between faith and blind faith or that an Act might not eradicate a pervasive religio-cultural and social evil that is reinforced further with increasing economic crisis of living for the masses making them increasingly vulnerable, he would counter with a simple sentence that a beginning had to be made and that he neither thought of nor aimed at any revolution as I did. He was unlike Gandhi in many ways but still sounded like one. Right since he began his social life in early eighties, he faced several threats and even physical attacks but he rejected police protection. According to the Times of India, he had stated, "If I have to take police protection in my own country from my own people, then there is something

wrong with me, I'm fighting within the framework of the Indian constitution and it is not against anyone, but for everyone." His Hindutva opponents however did not share the dilemma and were determined to make him a Gandhi. The assassins' bullets seem to have done it for them. The only difference is that we may never get hold of Nathuram!

Dr Anand Teltumbde is a writer, political analyst and civil rights activist with CPDR, Mumbai.

Indian Express

Anti-superstition activist Narendra Dabholkar shot dead

Express news service : Pune, Tue Aug 20 2013, 17:22 hrs

Maharashtra's leading anti-superstition activist Dr Narendra Dabholkar was shot dead by unidentified motorcycle-borne assailants in Pune on Tuesday morning. Dabholkar was on a morning walk on the Omkareshwar Bridge near the Balgandharva Rangamandir when he was attacked. He was 68.

Narendra Dabholkar: A literary genius

As per primary information received by the police from an eye-witness, two men alighted from a black motorbike, followed him and fired two rounds at him. After firing, they fled from the spot.

Dabholkar was found dead in a pool of blood at Omkareshwar bridge of the city.

Sharad Pawar condemns Dabholkar's killing

Dabholkar's body was identified by Manohar Patil, one of the activists who stayed at the *Sadhana* media center. His body was taken to Sassoon Hospital for post-mortem and would be taken to Satara for the final rites.

Pune Police Commissioner Gulabrao Pol, who reached the spot soon after the incident, said the police are probing all angles. He announced a reward of Rs 1 lakh for providing information regarding the incident.

Two cheques were found from Dabholkar's pockets, one of which was in the name of MANS, the organisation he set up in 1989. Also, a bus ticket for Satara was recovered from his pocket.

He had come to Pune for some work and was supposed to return to his home town in Satara later on Tuesday.

Dabholkar's killing comes at a time when the Maharashtra government had promised the introduction of the Anti-superstition Bill in the state legislature. The bill has evoked stiff opposition from various right wing elements, who claim it was an infringement on their fundamental rights. Dabholkar has been campaigning for the bill for the last three-four years.

India Today

Anti-superstition campaigner Narendra Dabholkar shot dead in Pune

India Today Online New Delhi, August 20, 2013 | UPDATED 13:32 IST

Narendra Dabholkar, a well-known rationalist pushing for a law against superstition in Maharashtra, was shot dead outside a temple in Pune on Tuesday morning.

Dabholkar, a doctor, was at the forefront of a campaign to persuade the Maharashtra government to pass an anti-superstition and black magic bill. Right wing Hindu groups including certain sections of Warkari sect and political parties have been opposing to the bill.

Dabholkar gunned down by unidentified motorcycle-riding assailants around 7.30 a.m. near Omkareshwar Temple, when he was on a morning walk, police said.

The two gunmen fired indiscriminately at Dabholkar and sped away, leaving him in a pool of blood.

He was rushed by other co-walkers to Sassoon Hospital where he succumbed to his injuries.

Pune Police Commissioner Gulabrao Pol said they were investigating the motive.

Police claimed to have got some leads on the killers, adding that at least four bullets found their target in the victim's neck and back.

Dabholkar was the founder of Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti (Committee for Eradication of Blind faith) that aimed to change social mindset and inculcate scientific temper.

Dabholkar's murder comes days the state government promised to introduce the long-pending Maharashtra Eradication of Blind Faith Bill in the current assembly session.

Dabholkar, who was in his 60s, began working against widespread superstition in 1983 and in 1989 founded the committee.

He also wrote many books on superstition eradication and confronted tantriks and seers who promised miracles.

He was also the founder of a de-addiction centre in Satara and also edited Marathi weekly Sadhana.

Condemning Dabholkar's killing, state Home Minister R.R. Patil vowed that his killers would be nabbed at the earliest and police were working in this direction.

A rationalist known for his bold views and sustained campaign against superstitions for over three decades, Dabholkar had rubbed many people the wrong way.

He led agitations against superstitions, animal sacrifices and even water pollution.

Dabholkar's killing has been widely condemned by people from all sections of society, most vocally on social media.

India Times

Narendra Dabholkar: Anti-Superstition Activist Shot Dead

by Sonal Bhadoria , IndiaTimes | August 20, 2013, 4:37 pm IST - Posted 17 hours ago

His fight against superstition seems to have cost him his life, but Dr Narendra Dabholkar's struggle to eradicate deep rooted superstitions of our society is far from over.

Narendra Dabholkar, leading anti-superstition campaigner, social worker and journalist, was gunned down in Pune by unidentified motorcycle-riding assailants, police said.

The attack took place around 7.30 a.m. near Omkareshwar Temple, when Dabholkar, in his 60s, was on his morning walk.The two gunmen fired indiscriminately at Dabholkar and sped away, leaving him in a pool of blood.The victim was rushed by other co-walkers to Sassoon Hospital where he succumbed to his injuries.

Police Commissioner Gulabrao Pol and other senior officials rushed to the scene of crime.Police claimed to have got some leads on the killers, adding that at least four bullets found their target in the victim's neck and back.

Two gunmen on motorbikes fired at Narendra Dabholkar, a medical doctor who had faced accusations of being anti-religion, as he was taking his morning walk in the western city of Pune, its police chief said.

"He was shot dead this morning, our investigations are on," Pune police commissioner Gulabrao Pol told AFP, adding that no suspects have yet been identified.

Condemning Dabholkar's killing, state Home Minister R.R. Patil vowed that his killers would be nabbed at the earliest and police were working in this direction.Announcing Rs. 10 lakh for any information on the murder, the Maharashtra government called it a planned killing and slammed the police for failing to protect the senior activist.

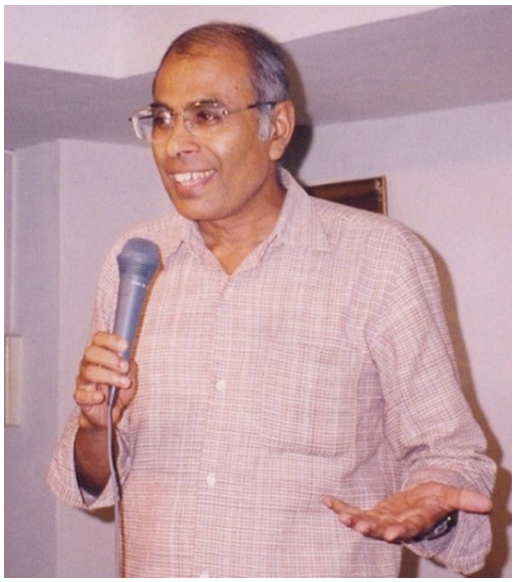
Dabholkar, a doctor, was at the forefront of a campaign to persuade the Maharashtra Government to pass an anti-superstition and black magic bill called the anti-JaduTona bill. Right wing Hindu groups, including certain sections of the Warkari Sect and political parties had been opposing to the bill.

A rationalist known for his bold views and sustained campaign against superstitions for over three decades, Dabholkar had rubbed many people the wrong way.In his 60s, he was largely instrumental in pushing the state government to frame an anti-superstition law which is in the final stages of legislative approval

Hailing from Satara, Dabholkar studied medicine from Miraj Medical College and practised medicine for about a decade, before taking up social work.

In 1989, he founded the Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti (MANS)-- the Committee for the

Eradication of Blind Faith --, along with a few like-minded people and raised cudgels against all types of superstitions, irrational practices, blind faith and beliefs, confronting dubious tantriks and babas who preyed on the gullible masses.



He also led agitations against superstitions, animal sacrifices and even water pollution, wrote columns and articles on his favourite topics and was editor of a couple of journals dedicated to the cause.

A look at the website antisuperstition.org showed how passionate he was about the cause and showcased the depth of his research about the topic. The site explains many superstitions like ghosts, black magic, witchcraft and provides scientific arguements against them.It also lists down many activities that one can undertake to dispel such superstitions and support the cause.

Dabholkar, known for his campaigns to promote progressive and scientific thought, had for several years been lobbying for Maharashtra state's parliament to pass legislation banning superstition and black magic.

Two years ago, in an interview with AFP, he rejected critics' charges that the bill was anti-religion.

"In the whole of the bill, there's not a single word about God or religion. Nothing like that. The Indian constitution allows freedom of worship and nobody can take that away," he said.

"This is about fraudulent and exploitative practices," he said.

Over the years, Dabholkar had also challenged some of India's "godmen," self-styled Hindu ascetics who have huge followings, over their claims of "miracles" performed. He has also campaigned against animal sacrifices sometimes used during religious rituals.

Dabholkar, who Indian media said was aged 71, was editor of a magazine called "Sadhana" or spiritual practice, devoted to the propagation of progressive thought.

Dabholkar's killing has been widely condemned by people from all sections of society and political parties alike.

But if our netas truly want to honour his life, they should give the Anti-Superstition bill, for which he fought so fervently, a serious thought , rather than engaging in mere lip service

The Diplomat

Indian Anti-Superstition Activist Narendra Dabholkar Killed in Pune

By Jonathan DeHart

August 21, 2013

On Tuesday Narendra Dabholkar, an outspoken campaigner against religious superstition in the Indian state of Maharashtra, was shot dead by two attackers on a motorbike during a morning walk in the city of Pune. Dabholkar, who was 67, was widely known as a campaigner in favor of passing a bill that would ban black magic in the western Indian state.

The killers have not yet been identified, but a passerby managed to glimpse their license plate and jotted down its numbers. Police reported that the assailants fired four shots at Dabholkar from cross range as they approached him from behind on a bridge near the Omkareshwar temple. The government of Maharashtra is offering a reward of 1 million rupees to anyone who can provide any additional information that will lead to the killers

.

"What has happened is shocking. It is really shameful," Vijaya Chauhan, an associate of Dabholkar, told *The Guardian*.

"This is an attempt to suppress a democratic movement. It's an attack on the Constitution, which asks its citizens to promote scientific temper," added Vivek Monteiro of the All India People's Science Network.

Dabholkar had earned the enmity of some extremist Hindus for his efforts to make some ascetic practices illegal. In a country where "godmen" claim to summon spirits, possess clairvoyance and healing powers, walk on hot coals, levitate, pierce their bodies and more, Dabholkar's challenge to superstition was not universally welcomed. He went as far as offering 500,000 rupees ($7,890) to anyone who could prove him wrong by conjuring spirits.

Chauhan also told *The Guardian* that Hindu ascetics were not the only ones incensed by Dabholkar's campaign for rationality. Politicians from the state's Hindu right were also opposed to the proposed bill, which also lacked support among members of the Congress party.

Dabholkar and his associates were actively engaged in spreading their message to Indian schools across the state.

Although he angered many, Dabholkar was quick to explain that his campaign was not intended to target religion. "In the whole of the bill, there's not a single word about God or religion. Nothing like that," he once said. "The Indian constitution allows freedom of worship and nobody can take that away. This is about fraudulent and exploitative practices."

Dabholkar was a former medical doctor who gave up his profession to promote rationalism in India. He also wrote several books, edited a weekly magazine called *Sadhana* and had close ties to Sanal Edamaruku, the founder of the Indian Rationalist Association who was forced to abscond to Europe after receiving death threats and facing blasphemy charges.

"The rationalist movement has been growing very fast over the last 10 years. I have experienced a lot of threats in my life and so have many others," Edamaruku told *Firstpost*.

Dabholkar's example and death have inspired many to continue working on behalf of his cause.

His associate Chauhan said, "The best way to pay homage to a man who had been campaigning relentlessly for the last 18 years for a law against superstitious religious practices is to immediately pass the bill in the state legislative assembly."

John HeyGhaati (@Sant_patil) tweeted: "Narendra Dabholkar constantly fought against goons hiding behind religious veil. He is shot dead. May his death strengthen his struggle."

Jonathan DeHart is assistant editor of The Diplomat.

Skepchick

Indian Rationalist Narendra Dabholkar Murdered

Rebecca Watson August 20, 2013

Horribly sad news out of India: Narendra Dabholkar, the founder and president of Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmulan Samiti (Committee for Eradication of Superstition of Maharashtra), was shot dead this morning by two unidentified men on a motorcycle.

Dabholkar was one of the leading advocates of an anti-superstition bill that was gaining momentum amongst progressives in Maharashtra. Conservatives and some religious sects opposed the bill as anti-Hindu, but despite that, the government announced a few days ago that it planned to table the bill.

If enacted, the bill would prohibit the following acts:

to perform Karni, Bhanamati,
to perform magical rites in the name of supernatural power,
to offer ash, talisman, charms etc. for the purpose of exorcism and to drive out evil spirits or ghosts,
to claim possession of supernatural powers and to advertise this claim,
to defame, disgrace the names of erstwhile Saints/ Gods, by claiming to be there reincarnation and thus cheating the gullible and God-fearing simple folks.
to claim to be possessed by divine power or evil power and then perform miracles in the name of such powers.
to punish and to beat mentally ill patients in the belief that they are possessed by evil spirits.
to perform Aghori rites.
to perform so called black magic and spread fear in society.
to perform “Gopal Santan Vidhi” to beget a male offspring.
to oppose scientific medical treatment and to coerce to adopt Aghori treatment.
to sell or deal in so-called magic stones, talisman, bracelets, charms.
to become possessed by supernatural powers and then pretend to give answers to any questions in this mental state.
to sacrifice innocent animals for the appeasement of gods or spirits.
to dispense magical remedies for curing rabies and snake bites.
to dispense medical remedies with claims of assured fertility.

Dabholkar was an associate of Sanal Edamaruku, the Indian rationalist who fled India under threat of arrest for blasphemy against the Catholic Church and who was the subject of many death threats, himself.

Police are investigating the murder but haven’t yet named any suspects or the motive.

This is a truly horrific blow to the otherwise strong rationalist community of India. While it could be the catalyst for a groundswell of support for the anti-superstition legislation, it will surely discourage other rationalists from stepping into the spotlight and agitating for real change in the way that Dabholkar did.

Edit: Steve Novella just reminded me of the death of Ajita Kamal, another Indian rationalist who died under mysterious circumstances in 2011. I’m unable to find any updates about the investigation into his death, but if anyone else has any information, please share.

By Rebecca Watson

Rebecca leads a team of skeptical female activists at Skepchick.org and appears on the weekly Skeptics' Guide to the Universe podcast. She travels around the world delivering entertaining talks on science, atheism, feminism, and skepticism. There is currently an asteroid orbiting the sun with her name on it. You can follow her every fascinating move on Twitter: @rebeccawatson.

first post: India

Narendra Dabholkar's battle was against superstition not religion

by Abhay Vaidya Aug 20, 2013

Eminent social reformer, rationalist and anti-superstition crusader Dr Narendra Dabholkar who was shot dead in Pune on Tuesday morning, felt deeply betrayed by Maharashtra's politicians who had failed to table the long-pending anti-black magic and superstition bill in the state assembly.

It was two weeks ago that Dabholkar had criticised chief minister Prithviraj Chavan at a press conference in Pune for not tabling the draft legislation in the recently-concluded monsoon session of the state assembly. He had said that even though the bill had been cleared by the cabinet and had been listed for business in the last seven sessions of the assembly, it had never been tabled for discussion.

The social crusader pointed out that the winter session of the state assembly was the only opportunity to table the bill before the 2014 elections next year. He had hoped that the government would issue an ordinance and use its majority to obtain concurrence.

During a speech in Panvel in November, 2012, on the occasion of Mahatma Phule's death anniversary, Dabholkar had cited the swiftness with which the British Governor General Lord William Bentinck had banned the practice of Sati in 1829 even though the East India Company had told him not to meddle in the religious practices of the natives. Dabholkar had said that Bentinck defended his action by saying that he couldn't be expected to keep quiet after seeing a woman die in a custom like Sati.

The social reformer said this swift action by the British official nearly two centuries ago was in sharp contrast to the situation in Maharashtra where the anti-superstition legislation had been kept pending for 18 years even though it had been approved by successive state cabinets.

The eminent social reformer, who peppered his oratory with humour, regretted the lack of sensitivity among the politicians in a state like Maharashtra which had seen an uninterrupted string of social reformers spread over 150 years from 1823 beginning with 'Lok Hitawadi' Gopal Hari Deshmukh till 1933, the year when Prabodhankar Thackeray died.

"No other state in the country has such an enviable record," Dabholkar had said while regretting that Maharashtra's politicians had failed to act in public interest.

On Tuesday morning, Dabholkar was shot dead by two unidentified assailants while out on his morning walk.

A doctor by training, Dabholkar hailed from Satara where he ran a clinic till 1982, after which he devoted himself fully to the anti-superstition movement. He served as the editor of the Marathi weekly Sadhana founded by the legendary Marathi writer, late Sane Guruji.

An accomplished orator, Dabholkar during his many campaigns and tours throughout Maharashtra had sought to spread awareness about the destructive and illogical aspects of superstitions practices. Although hated and criticised by orthodox Hindu groups for pointing fingers at their rituals, Dabholkar repeatedly maintained that he respected all religions, but was against superstitions practices. He pointed out forcefully and poignantly how superstitious practices hurt the poorest of the poor most parts of in rural Maharashtra.

During one of his campaign speeches in Panvel in 2012, Dabholkar had spoken of how an estimated 45 lakh kilos of rice was wasted every year in Maharashtra during marriage ceremonies. Referring to the "akshada ceremony" in which the assembled gathering sprinkles rice to bless the couple, Dabholkar said that at least 10-15 kg rice is used in each ceremony.

"Officially about three lakh marriages take place in Maharashtra; so if you calculate, 45 lakh kilos of rice is thus wasted every year," he had said.

He recalled how Hindu fundamentalists had opposed him when many years ago he and scientist Vasant Gowarikar had urged the people not to pollute Pune's rivers with Ganapati idols made of plaster-of-paris and painted with toxic colours.

He would tell gatherings how eminent Maharashtrians like the celebrated poet Kusumagraj and revolutionary freedom fighter Veer Savarkar had opposed many customs and superstitious practices in Hinduism.

"We must think for ourselves and examine the logic of our superstitions. We must be progressive and embrace change," Dabholkar had said.

He also recalled how a woman in Satara had become extremely weak and anaemic simply because she was denying herself nutritious food in the name of observing various ritualistic fasts.

"They could afford the best of food but her superstition was coming in the way," he said.

Stressing that he and others in the anti-superstition movement were not opposed to Hinduism or any other religion, Dabholkar would say that it is the constitution which exhorts every Indian citizen "to promote scientific temperament, spirit of enquiry, spirit of reform and humanism".

Full of optimism and hope, Dabholkar would point out how it had taken 2,000 years in India for women to get the right to educate themselves. While the first school for girls in India was started by Mahatma Phule in 1848, Bombay University was established a decade later and the first woman graduated from Bombay University four decades later, in 1887.

"Today you have girls topping the state board exams. Therefore, I am not disillusioned, but optimistic that eventually I shall be victorious in my campaign against superstition," he had said to the cheering audience at Panvel last year **.**

Hindustan Times

Dabholkar murder: incident a blow to state's image, says Chavan

HT Correspondent, Hindustan Times Mumbai, August 21, 2013

First Published: 08:32 IST(21/8/2013) | Last Updated: 10:30 IST(21/8/2013)

All political parties have called for a day-long bandh in Pune on Wednesday, condemning the murder of anti-superstition campaigner and social activist Dr Narendra Dabholkar.

Maharashtra CM Prithviraj Chavan says passing anti-superstition bill will be a real tribute to him.

The brazen murder of anti-superstition crusader Narendra Dabholkar on Tuesday morning in Pune is a major blot on the state government.

Various parts of Maharashtra witnessed protests and condemnation of the attack.

Many felt it is a failure of police intelligence, while deputy chief minister Ajit Pawar admitted it is an embarrassment for the government.

Chief minister Prithviraj Chavan condemned the attack and declared a reward of Rs10 lakh for information on the two assailants and those involved.

He said the killing of the antisuperstition activist comes as a blow to the image of progressive Maharashtra.

The government is committed to getting the anti-superstition bill passed, and that would be the real tribute to him, Chavan said.

Union agriculture minister and NCP chief Sharad Pawar described Dabholkar as a dedicated, selfless activist with progressive thinking.

“The progressive thoughts for which he gave his life will not die in the state. It appears that someone against his thoughts killed him. They are under a wrong impression that his thoughts would be finished by killing him,” he said.

The home minister of state RR Patil announced the inquiry has been handed over to the crime branch of Pune police.

“The matter is serious and I appeal to the people to maintain calm. The culprits will be nabbed soon. We have primary information on the attack,” he said.

The anti-superstition bill pending in the state legislature since a decade was drafted by Dabholkar in the late 1990s.

Later, Akhil Bhartiya Andhshraddha Nirmulan Samiti head Shyam Manav contributed to the process of changes made through deliberation with political parties and stakeholders.

On the activist’s killing, Manav said the fascist mindset in the state has crossed its limits, which is dangerous for the social fabric of the society.

Maharashtra Navnirman Sena chief Raj Thackeray said the failure in nabbing the culprit will point the needle of suspicion at the state government.

“My grandfather Prabodhankar Thackeray was a staunch preacher of anti-superstition.

What Dabholkar was following was not against any religion or god.

He was opposing ill practices in the society,” he added.

Senior BJP leader Gopinath Munde said Dabholkar's murder has shown that activists who work fearlessly for social causes are not safe in Maharashtra.

decade on, Dabholkar's bill still stuck

HT Correspondent, Hindustan Times Mumbai, August 21, 2013

First Published: 01:07 IST(21/8/2013) | Last Updated: 02:01 IST(21/8/2013)

After drafting the anti-superstition bill in the late 1990s, Dr Narendra Dabholkar would tirelessly land up at every session of the state legislature since 2003, when it was first tabled in the assembly, to lobby for its passage with the state government as well as the Opposition.

Activist Narendra Dabholkar, who was trying to get an anti-superstition and black magic bill passed, was shot dead in Pune on Tuesday morning.

It is now assumed that it was this contentious legislation, the first of its kind in the country — aimed at banning superstitions, inhuman rituals and black magic that have been used to exploit people in the name of religious beliefs — that cost Dabholkar his life.

The bill has had a controversial history and has gone through several drafts and 29 amendments in the last decade, the most recent changes being made earlier this year.

Outside the legislature, Dabholkar and his legislation have witnessed even more vehement opposition — from right-wing groups who claim it targets Hinduism. While hardline organisations like the Hindu Jan Jagruti Samiti and Sanatan Sanstha have openly declaimed the bill as anti-Hindu since its inception, the Warkari sect from the Bhakti movement joined their ranks two years ago, terming it an attempt to defame the Hindu religion.

The saffron combine has also steadfastly opposed the bill, and the state's ruling alliance had slow-motioned its progress fearing a backlash from the majority community.

"We are not opposed to eradication of inhuman practices and superstition, but the legislation in its current form is incomplete. It is limited to the Hindu religion and does not cover practices in Islam or Christianity, as if superstitious practices or rituals are only in the domain of Hinduism," said BJP state president Devendra Fadnavis. He said the government was being communal as it has kept the minorities out of the ambit of this law.

Dabholkar was a true crusader of rationalism

Satyajit Joshi, Hindustan Times Pune, August 21, 2013

First Published: 01:09 IST(21/8/2013) | Last Updated: 01:13 IST(21/8/2013)

Soft-spoken Dr Narendra Dabholkar, killed in Pune on Tuesday, was seen as a true representative of the rich tradition of progressive thought in Maharashtra.

He never allowed himself to deviate from his cause — eradicating superstition — and persisted with social reform and the rationalist thinking.

He crusaded against obscurantism for more than three decades, taking ahead the rationalist movement in Maharashtra started by Gopal Ganesh Aagarkar and justice Mahadeo Govind Ranade.

Dabholkar floated the Maharashtra Andhshraddha Nirmulan Samiti in 1996, but had been active in the pursuit of his ideals since his college days. He practised as a doctor for 12 years and devoted his life to what he thought was necessary for a healthy society.

Impressed by Dr Baba Adhav's "one village-one-well" movement in the seventies, he also participated in an agitation for the renaming of Marathwada University.

It was his life's goal to free Maharashtra from the clutches of superstitions. Hence, he undertook activities ranging from starting a de-addiction centre to biofarming. For almost a decade, Dr Dabholkar had campaigned against the manufacture of Ganesh idols made of Plaster of Paris (PoP), pointing out that their immersion was polluting river waters. His appeal was taken seriously by thousands across the state.

Books authored by him are considered an ideological source for activists. He also wrote several articles for various publications.

He was also the editor of Marathi weekly Sadhana for 13 years. Started by Sane Guruji, the magazine underwent several changes under Dabholkar's leadership, but the focus remained the same.

His conviction also resulted in many controversies. Dabholkar openly challenged astrologers and sadhus in Maharashtra. Activists from the samiti raided several places to expose such sadhus and forced the police take action against them.

He had also and declared a cash prize for anyone who could perform a miracle. Nobody accepted the challenge.

Asian Age

Anti-superstition activist Narendra Dabholkar shot dead

Pune: Activist Narendra Dabholkar, who was in the forefront of a campaign to persuade Maharashtra government to pass an anti-superstition and black magic bill, was shot dead here this morning by unknown assailants.

Dabholkar was found in a pool of blood at Omkareshwar bridge of the city. Dabholkar, who was also editor of "Sadhana" magazine devoted to propagation of progressive thought, succumbed to bullet injuries in the Sassoon Hospital here. Pune Police Commissioner Gulabrao Pol, who confirmed Dabholkar's death, said that police were investigating the motive but no suspects have so far been identified.

Dabholkar spearheaded the "Andhashraddha Nirmulan Samiti" (Anti-Superstition movement) to change social mindset and inculcate scientific temper. A staunch fighter for the cause of eradication of inhuman rituals and superstitions, Dabholkar was also in the forefront of the campaign to persuade Maharashtra government to pass an anti-superstition and black magic bill ---- opposed by certain sections of Warkari sect -- in the State legislature

The Telegraph

Black magic claims blood

JAIDEEP HARDIKAR

Nagpur, Aug. 20: Narendra Dabholkar, who had spent his life fighting superstition and was campaigning for a law to crack down on black magic that would be the first in the country, was today gunned down in the heart of Pune.

Dabholkar, 65, was out on his morning walk when two bikers shot him from behind. He took two bullets in his head and one in the stomach while a fourth grazed his forehead, and lay in a pool of blood before police took him to Sassoon hospital nearby where he was declared “brought dead”.

One of the new faces of Maharashtra’s socialist-rationalist traditions, he treaded the path shown by reformers like Jyotiba Phule, Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj, and Babasaheb Ambedkar.

Chief minister Prithviraj Chavan expressed shock and announced a reward of Rs 10 lakh for information on the assassins. “It’s a blot on Maharashtra’s progressive and pluralistic face,” said the chief minister, who had last week promised that the bill to fight superstition and black magic would be passed in the winter session.

Home minister R.R. Patil asked Pune police to hand over the probe to its crime branch. Dabholkar had refused Z-category security despite threats to his life, Patil said.

At least two radical groups — the Sanatan Sanstha and the Hindu Janajagruti Samiti — had allegedly issued threats to him in the past to stop pushing the anti-superstition bill.

The bill, first tabled and passed in the legislative council as a private member’s bill in 1995, has been cleared by the cabinet at least five times but has not been able to get through both Houses of the legislature.

While the Congress and the NCP support the bill — if passed, it would be the country’s first law on black magic and superstition — the BJP and Sena have reservations.

The groups opposed to it see the bill as an anti-faith legislation.

Dabholkar had rejected this argument in an interview two years ago: “In the whole of the bill, there’s not a single word about God or religion; nothing like that. The Indian Constitution allows freedom of worship and nobody can take that away. This is about fraudulent and exploitative practices.”

The latest draft, listed for the winter session, does not get into arguments on blind faith but simply lists the most common superstitions and practices. These include claiming possession of supernatural powers and advertising such claims, human and animal sacrifice to ward off evil or appease the spirits and gods, and selling or dealing in so-called magic stones, talisman, bracelets, charms etc.

Dabholkar had also received threats from Jaat panchayats — panchayats of dominant castes, a relatively new phenomenon in Maharashtra — after he called them unconstitutional and anti-democratic.

Freethoughtblog

Narendra Dabholkar assassinated in India

by PZ Myers

Dabholkar was a leader of the rationalist movement in India, who had been fighting for anti-superstition and anti-black magic bills. He was gunned down by cowards on motorcycles this morning — it was an assassination, plain and simple.

I'm passing along a brief summary I received this morning.

With deep distress and regret I have to report to you the assassination this morning of one of India's most important Rationalist and Humanist leaders, Dr. Narendra Dabholkar, founder of the Maharashtra Andha Shraddha Nirmulan Samiti or Maharashtra Forum for Elimination of Superstition. News is trickling in.

Inspired by the work of the great rationalist Basava Premanand, Dr. Dabholkar, a medical doctor, plunged into anti-superstition work in 1983 and built a concrete movement in his home state of Maharashtra. He was briefly Vice President of the Federation of Indian Rationalist Associations, a Member Organisation of IHEU.

A person of great charm and commitment to the cause,he refused to spread his activism outside Maharashtra because he was keen on first developing a branch of his organisation in each village of Maharashtra.

Organisational work of this kind made the movement a force to reckon with in Maharashtra state where he was spearheading the movement for a Bill against Witchcraft earlier called the Anti-Superstition Bill. The earlier Bill was passed in one house of the legislature but did not get through the second. His untiring efforts were successful, and the new Bill garnered the support of all the political parties except that of the Shiv Sena and the BJP. The ruling Congress party, however, did not take it up on the Business Agenda of the Legislature – many suspect that this was because of the upset it would cause to the orthodox. When passed, it would be a most potent weapon in the fight against superstitions which sap the life blood of Indian society.

Resist Anti-Scientific Temper Forces

We the scientist, rationalists, educators and intellectuals of the country learnt with shock and anger the brutal and inhuman murder of Dr Narandra Dabholkar. This murder is part of the series of attacks that have been perpetrated by anti scientific temper forces in the country. The attacks on artists, intellectuals and rationalists, all over the country, have increased exponentially.

Dr Dabholkar, a legendry figure in Maharashtra had contributed significantly to spreading scientific temper and sprit of enquiry. We strongly feel that it is duty of every citizen in the country to unequivocally condemn his murder. His noteworthy, untiring and courageous contribution in framing the 'anti-superstition and black magic bill', that is pending before the Maharashtra Assembly speaks volumes about his attitude towards fulfilling the constitutional duty. His murder is an attack on the fundamentals of our constitution.

The atmosphere of intolerance and anti-science attitude is sweeping the Indian sub-continent. It is created bythose vested interests, which benefit from spreading myths and superstitions. There is a deliberate plot to push our society towards fanaticism.

On March 13, 1958, Pt. Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India placed 'Scientific Policy Resolution' before the Parliament of the country and read the entire document and had hoped that science 'has provided new tools of thought' which will 'expand the mental horizon'. He had also hoped that science will influence the basic values of

life and give the Indian civilization and new vitality and a new dynamism. The opposition had demanded a discussion; every speaker endorsed the resolution and raised concerns to strengthen it. The debate is a witness to the commitment that our parliamentarians of the timetha they had towards eradicating myths and superstitions from our society. They had also recognised how difficult the task was.

Today we have come a long way, instead of debating and endorsing a bill that calls for eradication of superstitions,a person who pushes it in the assembly is killed in broaddaylight. The who killed Dr Dabholkar are scared of who hold rationality, independent thinking, questioning, scepticism, high. India, which has a long tradition of scepticism, humanism and sprit of enquiry, is facing a situation where anti-scientific temper forces apparently loom large. We call upon all those who stand by the constitution to rise and rededicate ourselves to spreading scientific temper.
We demand:

The perpetrators of this ghastly act should be immediately arrested, brought to the book and punished as per law of the land.

The anti-superstition and black magic bill should be passed immediately by Maharashtra Assembly.
A similar bill should be drafted, discussed and passed by the parliament of the country.

Gauhar Raza, Dinesh Abrol, Amitabh Pandey, Prof. IrfanHabib, Dr Subodh Mahanti, Dr TV Venkateswaran, Dr Surjit Singh. Dr. Ram Puniyani,

Dr.Narendra Dabholkar – A Tribute

Dr.Narendra Dabholkar, a well known rationalist and anti-superstition activist from Maharashtra was shot dead in Pune on 20th August 2013. He was the Founder of the Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti (Committee for Eradication of Superstition in Maharashtra). The Humanist community is shocked at this mindless violence. Narendra Dabholkar, a doctor by profession had dedicated his life to the cause of rationalism and humanism. He spearheaded several campaigns against superstitions and was involved in caste annihilation programmes. Narendra Dabholkar was campaigning to get an anti-superstition bill passed by the Maharashtra Government. A day after his death the Maharashtra state government cleared an Anti-Superstition and Black Magic Ordinance. The law seeks to make it punishable for self-styled godmen to prey on people by offering rituals, charms, magical cures and propagating black magic. He had made powerful enemies and had faced protests against his work.

Narendra Dabholkar also campaigned against rituals that harmed the environment. He won the court judgement that mandated all Ganesh idols to be made of clay and natural colors in Mumbai, where Ganesh is worshipped more fervently than anywhere else, and idols made using plaster of Paris and fluorescently bright paints which are environmental hazards and are dumped in the ocean in huge numbers every year. He became involved with movements against casteism and supported social justice for Dalits, such as Baba Adhav's "Ek gaav, ek panavtha" (One village, one well) agitation. Dabholkar was the editor of a renowned Marathi weekly Sadhana, which was founded by Sane Guruji.

Dabholkar had several qualities which made him a revered figure among the Maharashtrian populace brought up on the Phule-Shahu-Ambedkar philosophy. For someone trained in the socialist milieu of fifties and sixties by the greats like Sane guruji,Mr. S.M.Joshi,the journey from medical profession to full time social service was natural and seamless.The various battles for social justice and empowerment of the masses he undertook were imaginative and inclusive – be it the debunking of Nirmala Devi or Parvati Ma or Sathya Sai baba, the Shani Shinganapur movement for the equal rights to women in religious matters, his support to other activists' movements like those of Medha Patkar, Baba Amte, Baba Adhav, Abhay and Rani Bang.

A man never known to lose his cool in face of the most severe adversities, he was waging the war for the anti-superstition bill for eighteen long years. When he received a few years ago,a substantial sum of ten lakh rupees as token of appreciation for his selfless service, he did not think twice before giving it away to the movement. He never once talked about the personal sacrifices he made.Today the movement boasts of thousands of activists, many of them full timers who will not allow the baton to drop- a testimony to Dr.Dabholkar's formidable organizational skills

Article 51A(h) of the Indian Constitution enjoins every citizen of the country to develop scientific temper, humanism and the spirit of inquiry and reform. Narendra Dabholkar was doing exactly that and it is terribly unfortunate that his work was cut short by such a dastardly act. We condemn this brutal killing and avow to carry his work forward. .

http://nirmukta.com/2013/08/22/dr-narendra-dabholkar-a-tribute/

My Rationalist Brother Narendra Dabholkar – A Tribute

Narendra Nayak

We were at a National level advanced training program for demystifying miracles on the 20th of August when one of the activists of the Maharashtra Andha Shraddha Nirmulan Samithi who was a participant showed an SMS which imply said Dr.Narendra Bhabolkar shot dead. It was a terrible shock to us to hear that. He had been at the forefront of a movement to make this society a better, more egalitarian one. He had spent his whole life in the service of the society giving up what would have been a lucrative career as a medical practitioner.

As he said, my wife can look after my nursing home and I shall do my work for the movement and the way he did it. He was always busy at his office at Sadhana Publications attending to visitors, drafting letters, making write ups and directing his activists. He was such a meticulous planner that the organizations was running a bus which would have a time table set for a year in advance to visit schools in villages to spread scientific temper. He worked tirelessly to build up the movement and had told me that it was his life's ambition to see a unit of his organization in every village of the area of Maharashtra where his organization was active. In fact when Johannes Quack from the University of Frankfurt wrote a book on the Indian Rationalist movement-disenchanting India- the major portion of it was about the organization headed by Narendra Dhabolkar- the Maharashtra Andha Shraddha Nirmulan Samiti. He spent a few months with them and wrote extensively about their meticulous work in bringing about an attitudinal change in the superstition ridden villages of this region. He worked for the movement one village one well in which the caste system was to be attacked by having a single well for the use of people of all castes and communities. He worked hard- in fact had been trying for it for more than a decade to bring on a bill to make black magic as a criminal offence to deter unscrupulous people from cheating the gullible by the practice of what can be called as 'black magic'. His efforts were thwarted each time by the vested interests who had felt threatened by a law which would prevent them from exploiting the society.

He was one of the staunch supporters of FIRA and had organized its National Conference at Pune on a grand scale at Pune in 2007. It was a well attended affair and sadly the last one attended by the founder of FIRA, the late B.Premanand. However, Narendra Dabholkar's one wish was not fulfilled in his life time. In one of our meetings he had asked me about organizing an international rationalist meet. He was keen to have the experience of organizing such a one at Pune and was asking me about the details about how to go about it. Some years back he had been presented with the award for doing outstanding work for science popularization by the NCSTC. Some of the senior members of his organization had made discrete enquiries with me that they would like him to move to the national level and whether I had any objections to that. I had replied that he would be very, very welcome and I would be the happiest if that were to happen. After a few years I asked him when that plan would materialize and his reply was that only after he had a unit in each village that he would think of moving out of the state! Alas, that was never to come.

I was conducting the national advanced level program for training of volunteers working in the field of demystifying miracles and scientific temper when we received the terrible news from the members of his own organisation Maharashtra Andha Shraddha Nirmulan Samithi. All present were shocked by this and passed a unanimous resolution condemning it.

International – The News

A martyr to the cause of Reason

Praful Bidwai

The assassination of Indian anti-superstition activist Narendra Dabholkar in Pune is an ugly black mark on society. The forces of fanatical intolerance, superstition, irrationality and social reaction which killed Dabholkar did so not because he threatened their faith or freedom of expression, but because he believed that it's wrong to exploit people through black magic, sorcery, and sleights-of-hand while invoking supernatural powers.

Personal rivalry cannot explain Dabholkar's killing. As those knew him would testify – including this writer, who had the pleasure of knowing him and writing for the remarkable weekly 'Sadhana' which he edited – he was too amiable and disarming a man to inspire a personal animus.

Dabholkar was an independent intellectual with strong anti-superstition convictions, which are anathema to obscurantists, religious bigots and reactionaries. A society in which rationalist intellectuals are killed, but violent rituals to exorcise 'evil spirits' are condoned, cannot be called minimally civilised. India is hurtling towards that status: over the last 15 years, 2,500 women were killed in witchcraft rituals, according to anti-superstition activists.

The police still haven't determined who planned Dabholkar's killing, but it would be no surprise if caste panchayats or Hindutva groups like Sanatan Sanstha and Hindu Janajagriti Samiti – which hated his committee for the eradication of superstition – plotted it, their denials notwithstanding.

Sanatan Sanstha founder Jayant Athavale wrote a sinister obituary on Dabholkar: "instead of dying bedridden through illness, or a painful death following a surgery", he died instantly: this was, "in a way, a blessing of the Almighty". This can rationalise any murder, however revolting.

Three days later, activists of the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (the Bharatiya Janata Party's student wing) broke up a memorial meeting for Dabholkar in Pune, and assaulted members of the left-wing music band Kabir Kala Manch. They branded the organisers "Naxalites" because one of them refused to chant "Jai Narendra Modi" when ordered to do so.

Another pointer is the last anonymous threat to Dabholkar: "Remember Gandhi. Remember what we did to him". This lays claim to Nathuram Godse's hideous legacy. Even the normally mild-mannered Maharashtra Chief Minister Prithviraj Chavan said that Dabholkar's killers have "the same mindset" as Gandhi's assassins. One must sincerely hope that the police investigation is scrupulous and "gets to the bottom of the conspiracy", as Chavan promises.

The assassination is the latest in a series of explosions of intolerance witnessed in Pune, including the

ransacking of the prestigious Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute by the Maratha-chauvinist Sambhaji Brigade in 2004 over a book on Shivaji, killing of five progressive social activists in 2010, and the cancellation of a screening of Sanjay Kak's film on Kashmir in 2012.

Dabholkar's killing marks a new low in Maharashtra's cultural retrogression. This is especially tragic because Maharashtra was the crucible of India's progressive social reform movement for a century, led by Shahu Maharaj, Jyotiba Phule, Savitribai Phule, Gopal Ganesh Agarkar, DK Karve, MG Ranade, Ramabai Ranade, and not least, BR Ambedkar.

Social reform took roots among ordinary people mainly in Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, where its leaders articulated the plebeian masses' aspirations. The mobilisation of Dalits and Other Backward Classes, which followed later in North India, owes much to this early movement.

Maharashtra saw the flowering of India's first Bahujan Samaj (non-Brahmin) mobilisation against religious orthodoxy, casteism, sati, gender discrimination, and barring of temple entry to Dalits. The movement championed girls'/women's education and widow remarriage. It firmly embraced the Enlightenment values of reason and critical inquiry.

The reformists always faced venomous opposition, including social boycott, from traditionalists and upper-caste status-quoists. But they heroically resisted – and at times succeeded in pushing through pro-people measures.

The balance changed in the 1960s with the rise of the chauvinist-communal Shiv Sena, which worked to reverse the gains of social reform, with support from the ruling Congress. With this, says social critic Shanta Gokhale, the needle that had oscillated "between Maharashtra's progressive and regressive heritage stopped on the side of regression."

Dabholkar was a rationalist. But he didn't campaign against faith per se, only against blind faith and exploitation of gullible people through witchcraft, tricks passed off as 'miracles', and infliction of harmful 'magical' rites such as beatings and torture to drive out the 'evil spirits' to which people's health or financial problems are falsely attributed.

He trenchantly opposed tantrik-shamanic practices such as preventing medical treatment for illnesses, and relying on mantras instead; animal and human sacrifice to ward off ill-luck; falsely branding people as Satanical agents or carriers of misfortune; or claiming to perform surgery or change the sex of a foetus with one's fingers.

Dabholkar lobbied hard for the Maharashtra Prevention and Eradication of Human Sacrifice and other Inhuman, Evil and Aghori Practices and Black Magic Bill, which hung fire for 18 years thanks to the Hindu Right's opposition. This law seeks to prosecute people for claiming supernatural powers; defaming saints/gods by claiming to be their reincarnation; and ill-treating people in psychological distress in the belief that they are smitten by evil spirits.

It covers rituals performed to beget a male child, and claims to omniscience by virtue of being 'possessed' by supernatural powers. After Dabholkar's killing, the Maharashtra government brought an ordinance to implement the Bill.

This only completes one part of Dabholkar's unfinished agenda. The rest lies in extending such laws to the whole of India, and vigorously promoting the scientific temper and a spirit of critical inquiry – not just in classrooms, not just to earn degrees or jobs, but in daily life, while making crucial decisions about individual freedom, marriage,

the family and religion.

This agenda has acquired great relevance and urgency in today's South Asia. Liberalisation and globalisation have disrupted old social balances and faith systems and given rise to a politicised religiosity in our region. A 'pop Hinduism' thrives in India, centred on temples, pilgrimages, god-men and -women, with new, more ostentatious rituals – amidst an explosive growth of superstition, especially among the middle class.

In the 1960s, being superstitious was considered incorrect and infra dig among educated Indians. Now, it's fashionable to rely on astrological predictions, wear flashy gemstones, get advice from outright quacks, and deify sadhus and self-proclaimed holy men. Weird practices like wiccanism (literally, practising witchcraft), regression therapy (when you delude yourself to be the reincarnation of a mythological figure like Kaikeyi), and performance of elaborate havans and yagnas to bring fortune have pervaded middle class life. Observances like kathas, jagrans and bhajans are getting more public and raucous.

As Meera Nanda argues in The God Market, this religiosity is cultivated by "the emerging state-temple-corporate complex", which is corrupting secular public institutions and embedding Hindu rituals and symbols in the affairs of the state. Hindu religiosity is also getting fused with national pride and the idea that India's recent (and alas, fast-eroding) economic success is rooted in the superiority of its ancient (read, Hindu) civilisation. This religiosity is supported by the state, temple-related bodies, and business groups. It's easily harnessed to political causes and to greater intolerance towards the religious minorities. This is nowhere more evident than in Ayodhya, where a new kind of parikrama was invented to sow communal hatred. Opposing such pernicious practices and defending rationality would be the right homage to Dabholkar.

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Asaram's arrest vindicates Narendra Dabholkar

Praful Bidwai

It's only a coincidence that the assassination of anti-superstition activist Narendra Dabholkar was followed within a fortnight by the arrest of godman Asaram Bapu on charges of sexual assault on a 16-year-old schoolgirl. Both were ugly black-marks on Indian society — the first because it highlighted fanatical intolerance towards an intellectual who campaigned against the exploitation of people through black magic, sorcery, and sleights-of-hand by quacks who claim supernatural powers; and the second because it spoke to the persistence of the power that self-proclaimed holy men have over gullible people, which can be abused to grotesque ends

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Bapu reportedly persuaded the victim's relatives that she was possessed by evil forces, which he would exorcise by performing certain rituals; under that pretence, he molested and sexually assaulted the girl for more than an hour.

This is only one of many recent incidents of sexual abuse by self-styled godmen. What makes it particularly obnoxious is the defiant posture adopted by hundreds of Bapu's loyal followers against attempts to arrest him.

The ferocity isn't unrelated to the immense power of Bapu's Rs5,000-crore empire and the devotees' dogmatic belief that the "spiritual" guru could do no wrong

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Bapu's criminal misconduct closely fits some of the offences defined under the Maharashtra Prevention and Eradication of Human Sacrifice and other Inhuman, Evil and Aghori Practices and Black Magic Bill, which the government has just passed as an ordinance after a delay of 18 years. The delay is partly explained by the Hindu Right's resistance, and partly by aversion on the part of many Maharashtra Congress leaders, including former Chief Ministers Vilasrao Deshmukh and Ashok Chavan, themselves Sathya Sai Baba devotees

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The Hindu Right's opposition to the Bill is predictable, and was voiced in dire threats to Dabholkar, including the last one, which brazenly claimed Nathuram Godse's legacy: "Remember Gandhi. Remember what we did to him". However, some liberal commentators have also expressed reservations about the Bill on the grounds that it enshrines paternalism and seeks to regulate or outlaw superstition, contrasting it to science and rationality. This criticism is misplaced. Neither the Bill, nor Dabholkar the rationalist, sought to outlaw superstition. Dabholkar didn't campaign against faith as such, but only the consequences of practices based on blind faith and superstition-driven rituals insofar as these cause bodily or psychological harm. The Bill/ordinance too punishes specific practices: human sacrifice, assault, torture, sexual abuse, etc, committed in the course of exorcism, performance of miracles, magical "cures" and "blessings" through beatings, and prevention of medical treatment. All this should be unexceptionable

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However, the time has come to ask if Indian society shouldn't aim for something higher—vigorous promotion of Enlightenment values, the scientific temper and critical inquiry—not just in classrooms, not only to earn degrees, but in daily life, while making decisions about individual freedoms, marriage, the family and religion. This cannot be done by law, but mainly through a social reform movement

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This is an urgent task. Liberalisation and globalisation have disrupted old faith systems and given rise to a politicised religiosity centred on temples, pilgrimages, god-men and godwomen, with new, more ostentatious rituals — amidst an explosive growth of superstition among the middle class. As Meera Nanda's The God Market argues, this religiosity is cultivated by "the state-temple-corporate complex", which is corrupting secular public institutions. This religiosity is easily harnessed to political causes and to intolerance towards the religious minorities. This is nowhere more evident than in Ayodhya

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Economic & Political Weekly

Keeper of Maharashtra's Conscience

Narendra Dabholkar, the most well-known rationalist and anti-superstition voice in Maharashtra in recent decades, fought for women's freedom in an area that hardly anyone bothered to address. He realised that lakhs of women became either the unwitting victims of fraudulent *babas* and godmen due to social and cultural pressures or gave in to beliefs that harmed their physical and mental health irrevocably. He was also active in the battle to vanquish the devadasi system, the obnoxious practice of "dedicating" young girls to the goddess Yellamma and condemning them to lives of sexual slavery and misery.

The 67-year-old Dabholkar, who was shot dead by two motorcycle riders on 20 August when out for a walk in Shanivar Peth in Pune, was written about on the basis of his dogged fight to get the Maharashtra Eradication of Black Magic, and Evil and Aghori Practices Bill passed in the Maharashtra legislature. It was in this aspect that he was praised and reviled the most. But there were many other areas that he was active in, knowing that practices therein were offshoots of the same mentality that endorsed blind obedience to exploitative rituals. He took up the battle with *jaat* panchayats in Maharashtra which of late had begun violently hounding young couples who chose their marriage partners from other castes. One of his pet campaigns on which he had won a ruling from the Bombay High Court was against the immersion of Ganesha idols in rivers and lakes and the setting up of artificial water bodies by municipal and local authorities instead. He advocated the use of eco-friendly material to make the idols and a ban on plaster of Paris.

Interestingly, almost every progressive stream in Maharashtra sought his presence and many of the socialist, liberal political groups tried to cajole him into joining them. While he steadfastly refused to join any political outfit, he lent his support to every campaign that dealt a blow to well-entrenched repressive and discriminatory practices. In fact, no venue was too remote, no organisation too small for Dabholkar to enthusiastically accept the invitation to speak, chair or lead demonstrations against puerile beliefs and practices. He travelled the length and breadth of Maharashtra exhorting people to examine such practices.

Just as he was sought after, he too reached out to all those elements that could help in his single-minded battle. Popular actress Sonali Kulkarni spoke about how the camp he had organised for young women in Solapur, was a "turning point" in her life. Others like Amol Palekar and his wife Sandhya Gokhale, Kishore Kadam (theatre and cinema), Atul Pethe (theatre) and Paresh Mokashi (director of the award-winning *Harishchandrachi Factory*) were also staunch supporters. Dabholkar also recently acted in a film that targeted the superstitions rampant in the tribal belt. Similarly, progressive writers including dalit writers and poets, students' and women's rights' activists all rallied round him and got his support in turn.

Multifaceted Activities

His activities were indicative of the multipronged campaign he spearheaded. Since he believed in dialogue and discussion, challenging godmen who performed "miracles" and astrologers who made grandiose claims to public meetings and demonstration of their "powers", was a favourite mechanism. Reading about his experiences in the media interviews he gave or the annals of the Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti (MANS), you almost get the impression that he must have got quite used to having eggs thrown at him on the stage and to being heckled by his opponents. For all his ability to raise the tempers of those who lived by chicanery and mixed-up religious faith with blind belief, Dabholkar did not stage dramatic confrontations with television news cameras in tow, as is the habit of protestors that the mainstream media loves to cover. For example, if you watch his speech on the godman Nirmal Baba who prescribed "green chutney" as a solution for life's problems one can see a textbook case of reasoned argument and dry humour.

In the eulogies that followed his death, there were some that praised his great oratory. There was nothing of that in him if one goes by the popular Indian perception of great oratory (especially by political leaders). There were no flights of fancy rhetoric, dramatic denouncements and wild allegations and no attempt to draw laughter with cheap digs at opponents. In the above-mentioned example, he starts with a *shloka* by Maharashtra's beloved poet-sage sant Tukaram who often spoke out against blind faith in religious practices. He then goes on to lucidly argue in almost a schoolmasterish fashion against the godman's statements.

His organisation took up almost every issue that has had an enormous bearing on the lives of ordinary citizens but which are not "popular" enough for the political parties. MANS targeted the ingrained practice of taking the mentally ill to babas who claimed to chase out the devils possessing the patient. Activists held mental health awareness drives in remote areas and villages and invited psychiatrists to speak and counsel. When a family in Pune committed suicide last year ostensibly because they were told that their reigning stars were in unfavourable positions, the organisation held a talk by Dabholkar to "critically examine the basis of astrology as well as the various arguments given in its favour". He also tried tirelessly to popularise the works of the enviable line of anti-establishment social reformers that Maharashtra had down the centuries. Dabholkar had also founded a de-

addiction centre called Parivartan in his hometown and it caters to patients from Satara, Sangli, Kolhapur districts. MANS also campaigned tirelessly against early marriages of girls especially in the rural areas leading to early child births and debilitating illnesses. In turn, these young women are then subjected to the "cures" of godmen for these diseases or for mental illnesses like hysteria :effect-of-superstition-on-health-and-nutrition-of-women&catid=46:women-and-superstition).

As the president of the Federation of Indian Rationalist Associations, Narendra Nayak said in a tribute, Dabholkar was known for such meticulous planning that the MANS' vehicle had a timetable drafted a year in advance so that visits to schools in villages to spread the scientific temper could take place smoothly.

Dabholkar also edited the Marathi weekly *Sadhana* for two decades. The weekly which put up a spirited fight against the Emergency (it was forcibly closed down but won on appeal to the Bombay High Court and began publishing again) has been the mouthpiece of Maharashtra's socialists ever since the writer-reformer Sane Guruji started it in 1948. It also threw open its pages to the poetry and writings of dalit litterateurs.

Influences and Education

Among the influences on Dabholkar's thinking and teaching was that of the great rationalist from Sri Lanka, Abraham Kovoor. In fact, the MANS website has always had information on Kovoor's life and activities. In 1963, Kovoor publicly offered a sum of Rs (Sri Lankan) 1 lakh to any person who could perform a paranormal miracle under "fraud-proof" conditions. Among his most well-known works is *Be Gone Godmen*. Born in Kerala, his father was the Vicar General of the Mar Thomma Syrian Church of Malabar. Educated in the US and highly qualified, Kovoor only believed in rationalism. He too reached out to people through films and books (translated into a number of Indian languages) and networked with likeminded scientists to taunt and goad fraudulent godmen into picking up challenges to demonstrate their miraculous powers publicly under scrutiny. Again, he too held public lectures scientifically denouncing the mumbo jumbo of the godmen. Among his favourite targets was Sathya Sai Baba of Puttaparthy. His offer of Rs 1 lakh to anyone (he also named a number of Indian and international personalities who claimed paranormal powers) who could perform 23 miracles he listed is worth perusing. The rationalist Sanal Edamaruku (president of the Indian Rationalist Association and editor of *Rationalist International*) who had to flee to Europe following death threats and blasphemy cases was also a friend of Dabholkar's.

Dabholkar was born on 1 November 1945 in Satara and studied in the New English School and later in the Willingdon College in Sangli and went on to do his MBBS from the Miraj Medical College. He was a kabaddi enthusiast in school and later captain of the university team, even representing the country in Asian tournaments and winning a state government award for the sport. Following a 12-year medical practice he left it (his wife Shaila Dabholkar is a gynaecologist, son Hamid is a psychiatrist and daughter Mukta is a lawyer and the latter two are active in the MANS) to start the organisation in 1989. Before that, he had joined Baba Adhav's anti-casteist "one village, one well" campaign in 1983. He was also active in the Akhil Bharatiya Andhashraddha-Nirmulan Samiti founded by another well-known rationalist activist Shyam Manav but left it after some differences to form the MANS.

It was his relentless 18-year-old campaign to get the Maharashtra government to pass the Maharashtra Eradication of Black Magic, Evil and Aghori Practices Bill (also known as the Anti-Jaadu Tona Bill) that led to him being admired and reviled passionately. As is well known by now, it went into 29 amendments and was produced before the legislature in seven sessions but never taken up for discussion. Through it all, Dabholkar continued campaigning for the bill, talking to politicians, activists and ordinary citizens, refusing to give up or take up any violent activity either. That the Maharashtra cabinet passed an ordinance on the bill a day after his death is an irony that has not been lost on the people of the state. It is typical of the Congress-Nationalist Congress Party coalition to shrilly invoke the state's "progressive" tradition when it is convenient and quietly thwart progressive moves for the same purpose.

The ordinance makes it illegal (among other provisions) to perform magical rites in the name of supernatural power, advertise the claim to have such powers, offer charms, etc, to exorcise evil spirits, claim to be the

reincarnation of saints, to beat mentally ill patients in the name of curing them, offer to perform rituals to have a male child and sell or offer medicines for various medical conditions and snake bites and rabies. The Shiv Sena and the Bharatiya Janata Party are unhappy with this. Apart from wanting a public debate on many of the provisions they also feel that Dabholkar exclusively targeted the Hindu religion.

A Battle of 'Mindsets'

A number of Hindu right-wing organisations which had left no stone unturned to condemn Dabholkar in the last three decades became the focus of suspicion for his death. However, all of them have said that while they were strong opponents they would not stoop to murder. In any case, as Dabholkar's associates recall, threats, disruptions of his public meetings and even attacks with sticks were hardly unknown to him. The Hindu Janajagruti Samiti's website often carried condemnatory pieces on Dabholkar and he was often referred to as *dharma drohi*

Another right-wing organisation, the Sanatan Sanstha had, by its own admission, filed more than 20 legal cases against Dabholkar for making "false allegations" against it. Dabholkar's one-time associate and fellow traveller in the fight against superstition, Shyam Manav of the All India Andhashraddha Nirmulan Samiti said that the killing was "an outcome of the mindset of those who subscribe to the Sanstha. What makes the battle more difficult is that it is not an organisation that can be dealt with logic or dialogue" (26 August 2013, *Indian Express*, Mumbai).

For over 30 decades Dabholkar attempted the difficult – battling those who used religion to spread obscurantism and exploit the gullible and vulnerable in the realm of ideas and public discourse. How far the MANS will be able to sustain his work will be a testimony as much to Dabholkar's legacy as to Maharashtra's long progressive history.

The Dilemmas and Challenges faced by the Rationalist Indian

T V Venkateswaran

The murder of renowned rationalist Narendra Dabholkar on the streets of Pune on 20 August, 2013, was a wake-up call for the nation. While out on his morning walk, two unidentified assailants on a motorcycle fired at him from close range near the Omkareshwar bridge. As the news of his gruesome murder spread, spontaneous demonstrations took place across Maharashtra. In his home town Satara, thousands came out to pay tribute to this leading light of the anti-superstition movement who had taken on many a self-appointed godmen. The all-party bandh called the next day was near complete with willing participants closing their businesses and shops. The chilling effect of the premeditated murder reverberated throughout the state. Witnessing the public outrage, the state cabinet hastily promulgated an anti-superstition ordinance based on the "Maharashtra Prevention and Eradication of Human Sacrifice and other Inhuman Evil Practices and Black Magic Bill". Dhabolkar had been relentlessly campaigning for the adoption of this bill, which has been languishing in the assembly for many years.

The Anti-Superstition Crusader

Although Dabholkar's reformist ideas often led to confrontation, he always sought compromise and reconciliation. Firm in his conviction, he was altogether non-violent in his approach. He met his shrill and abusive opponents with calm and sober arguments and said that "in the struggle to end ignorance he did not need any weapons". Though Dabholkar had lately received several death threats and hate mails from some Hindu extremist groups, he refused to seek police protection. Who would have imagined that this mild mannered and soft spoken man would end up getting murdered in cold blood?

Though Sanatan Sanstha, a Hindu extremist organisation, suspected of murdering Dabholkar, denied its role in the murder, its ideologue Jayant Athvale in the organisation's mouthpiece *Santhan Prabhat* diabolically wrote "it's God's grace to die in a manner in which Dabholkar died. It is better than dying of a prolonged illness or suffering from pain induced by surgical procedures".

Dabholkar was a versatile man with a medical degree and a keen interest in social reform. Perhaps, the tenacity with which he pursued the anti-superstition bill for many years came from his training as a kabaddi player. His district team won not only the coveted Ashwini Kumar Bhoir Gold Cup, but he also represented India in a match against Bangladesh in a kabbaddi tournament. Inspired by the Socialist labour leader and social reformer Baba Adhav's "One village, one drinking water well" campaign, Dabholkar quit his lucrative medical profession to undertake social work and cultural reform. He opined that the caste is at the root of inequality in the Indian society, and without a cultural revolution equality was not possible. He strived for the annihilation of the caste system. Just days before his death, Dabholkar appeared on a television panel discussion on the role of caste panchayats in the context of the murder of a girl by her own father in Nashik, as she had dared to marry outside her caste.

In the past thirty years there has been a marked increase in use of religious and sectarian identities for political gains, emergence of irrational cults in the name of religion and the glorification of obscurantist practices in the name of culture. This has provided the ideological basis for, at times, brutal unscientific actions in both public and personal domains. Discrimination based on caste, gender and ethnic identities perpetuated on the basis of irrational beliefs and superstitions is still widely prevalent and is on the rise. In no small measure, the privatisation of electronic media has also had the undesirable effect of providing a platform and visibility to the forces responsible for the spread of irrationality and undermining of the scientific temper.

Open to Misinterpretation: Section 259A

Article 51 A (h) of the Constitution of India urges every citizen "to develop the scientific temper, humanism and the spirit of inquiry and reform". However, this endeavour is becoming not just difficult but dangerous and, at times, lethal as in the case of Dabholkar. When intolerance rules the roost, not just taking on superstitious practices, but even activities such as bringing out large number of people to watch the "total solar eclipse", or a critical appraisal of public policies becomes problematic.

The murder of Dabholkar compels us to ruminate over two dilemmas; free speech versus reasonable restrictions in the light of the section 259A of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), and the contending claims of cultural relativism and social reform.

Indeed as hate speeches silence the minorities and are inimical to democracy, some form of reasonable restrictions appear incumbent. Hate speeches create a volatile situation leading to communal violence. This in turn leads to the ghettoisation of minorities and prevents them from from participating effectively and freely in the democratic process with confidence. In the worst case scenario, as in Rwanda or in Nazi Germany, hate speeches may lead to physical elimination of a section of the population on the basis of religion, race, ethnicity, caste, gender or sexual orientation. In a plural society, such as ours, it is necessary not only to respect the different religious beliefs; feelings and practices of all but also protect these from scurrility, vilification, ridicule and hate. However, drawing the line between a hate speech and a rational "condemnation" of practices or religious views is disputatious.

Akin to the hate speech law in the IPC is the contentious section 295A. Lord *Macaulay* avowing that "I am not a Mussulman; but if I were a judge in India, I should have no scruple about punishing a Christian who should pollute a mosque", inserted section 295 that criminalises the actions of "whoever destroys, damages or defiles any place of worship, or any object held sacred by any class of persons". But a provision under this section which outlaws "deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings of any class" has become a bone of contention. Far from protecting social and communal harmony, section 295A has a history of abuse and arbitrary imposition.

The Supreme Court in the light of the freedom of speech guaranteed under the section 19 of the Indian Constitution, in the "Ramji Lal Modi vs State of Utter Pradesh" stated that "295A does not penalize any and every… insult to or attempt to insult the religion or the religious beliefs' but ...it penalizes only those acts [or] insults to or those varieties of attempts to insult the religion or the religious beliefs of a class of citizens, which are perpetuated with the deliberate and malicious intention of outraging the religious feelings of the class". The court made a distinction between intentional insults that clearly had a "calculated tendency" to "disrupt the public order" and "insults to religion offered unwittingly or carelessly or without any deliberate or malicious intention". Yet history is replete with instances of abuse and harassment of those who take up cudgels against superstition and the so called godmen.

Abuse of Section 295A: Some Examples

Take the case of two young women in Mumbai who were recently arrested for posting an innocuous comment on Facebook which described the reaction of the city to the death of Shiv Sena leader Bal Thackeray as disproportional. The police booked them under the notorious 295A of IPC. It is another matter that the case was dropped and the officers responsible for the arrest were suspended for overreacting. How can we expect democracy to flourish and thrive if one cannot boldly express contentious views without fear or threat?

Or take the case of Sanal Edamaruku who for now more than a decade along with his colleagues from the Indian Rationalist Association has been promoting reason and humanism. He and members of his innovative "Rationalist Reality Theatre" group visit villages dressed as godmen. They perform "miracles" before the audience who think that they are actually witnessing miracles performed by holy-men. Then suddenly the activists pull the curtain revealing the scientific basis behind the so called miracles. The intention of such activities is to inculcate scientific temper.

Recently, Edamaruku and his colleagues investigated the alleged miracle of water dripping from the statue of Jesus Christ at the Catholic Church of Our Lady in Vile Parle, Mumbai. After establishing that the cause was just a leaky pipe with water travelling up the statue by capillary action, Sanal appeared on prime time Mumbai TV to debunk the so called miracle. Next day, seventeen complaints were filed against him at various police stations all invoking section 295A of the IPC. Having been denied anticipatory bail and fearing pre-trial imprisonment, Sanal sought refuge in Europe. Most likely Sanal will be discharged of all the accusations levied against him, but it is absolutely certain that he will spend the next several years chasing lawyers and visiting courtrooms.

In February 2010, Hulikal Nataraj, a school teacher and rationalist, in a TV interview had stated that the so called miraculous divine *Jyothi* at the Sabarimala Ayyappa temple was a human creation. This allegedly hurt the sentiment of a Bajarang Dal activist on who's complaint a non-bailable arrest warrant was issued against Nataraj. However, a Karnataka High court judge H N Nagamohan Das not only quashed the case but also indicted the entire system by summoning the home secretary to the court. As a result the increment of the sub-inspector who had attempted to arrest Nataraj was withheld.

When Tamil Nadu Science Forum, an organisation committed to popularisation of science, wanted to arrange for a public viewing of the annual solar eclipse in 2011, and cook and eat food during the eclipse in defiance of the taboo, the police gave their permission reluctantly to hold the event. Rationalist campaigner Narandera Nayak had a brief brush with section 295A when he contended that the cow urine was just like the urine of any other animal and there is nothing sacred about it. When the Kannada movie actress Jayamala allegedly visited the Sabrimala temple violating the taboo, which forbids women in the menstruating age bracket to enter it, the same provision was invoked. The ludicrous extreme to much which this provision could be abused is apparent from the reported arrest of Kartik, a youth, who's crime was to reply to an Hanuman Jayanthi greeting with a comment that "there is no god". He was taken in police custody on the grounds of "hurting religious sentiments" invoking section 259A.

It is as if anyone can take offense to anything nowadays. Pandering to such intense sensitivity could become counter-productive. Liberal criticism helps expose notorious practices within a religion that may violate human rights. As history has shown evil practices such as Sati or dowry were severely condemned by social reformers

even in the face of opposition from groups defending these customs. Subsequently, legislations prohibiting these practices were adopted. No social reform would have been possible if we were intolerant to criticism, or prohibit condemnation of religious and cultural practices. The freedom of religion implies tolerance of offensive or dissenting views. Stifling criticism and rational disapprobation impinges upon the freedom of speech on the one hand and potential reform on the other. There is no right to be not offended.

As the "reasonable restrictions" on free speech in reality are no longer applied in a reasonable way, a chilling atmosphere stifling free speech and thought is created. It is evident that the public sphere is getting more and more stifled with the recurrent abuse of the section 295A.

Though the misuse of section 295A is rampant, its off-hand repeal may be prove to be counterproductive given the fact that hate speeches calculated to raise passions are a reality. Even the severest condemnation by rationalists of some religious practices is inspired by humanism and may at best inspire reform and at worst a conspiracy of silence. But the underlying intention of a hate speech is neither reform nor is the motive humanism. Free speech has to be balanced with other requirements for the democracy to work. Perhaps the urgent need is to recast section 259A on the model of hate speech laws of Canada, South Africa and European Union, and balance the need for critical examination of religion and all cultural practices with the need to protect minorities (religious, cultural, ethnic and sexual orientation etc.) from ridicule and hate.

Cultural Pluralism vs Rationality

Cultural pluralism poses another dilemma. If the French are to be condemned for adopting domestic laws prohibiting the wearing of a veil and branded as intolerant to cultural sensitivities, then can one take offence to the public display of religious symbols, figures, images and artefacts in government offices, religious ceremonies in institutes and religious invocations during inaugurations of scientific conferences? A number of acts such as these, including taking of the miniature rocket to the temple at Tirupati for blessings, are accepted in the name of culture.

This then raises some serious questions? Why ban the sale of amulets, magic stones, talismans, bracelets and charms when we are not ready to ban the sale of “astrological stones”; why ban animal sacrifice for the appeasement of gods or spirits when we are not ready to ban let’s say, brahminical rituals? Do these bans subtly display discrimination, subtly place neo-vedantic religion on a pedestal while demeaning the practices of other cultures? What would be the rationale behind demarcating legitimate religious and cultural practices from ones that need to be prohibited?

Indeed it looks “cool” to be defending the culture or practices of the underdog, however dreadful these might be. But on the ground, when poor and marginalised families fatalistically resort to talisman and charms rather than organise themselves to demand their entitlements, cultural relativism does not seem so charming. When traditions trample human rights, discriminate on the basis of gender and caste, they suddenly appear not so glorious.

A relook at the concept of scientific temper and reform is an urgent task. This cannot be brushed aside as an archaic or a Nehruvian idea. In a multicultural and a pluralist society such as ours, if we need to abjure violence and promote democracy, then we need to engage with these questions intensely and immediately.

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Times of India

An age of disbelief: Con men thrive under the garb of religion

Swami Agnivesh & VALSON THAMPU Sep 5, 2013, 12.00AM IST

If i had a guru, and i am looking for one, i should surrender myself body and soul to him. But in this age of unbelief a true guru is hard to find. A substitute will be worse than useless, often positively harmful. I must therefore warn all against accepting imperfect ones as gurus...Has a man ever learnt swimming by tying a stone to his neck? - M K Gandhi.

Godmen are in the news increasingly for the wrong reasons. Events reported shock us for a while. Public memory being proverbially short, in a few days we leave behind the scandal and get back to business as usual. Till the next scandal breaks out. Then the next. And the next...So the tamasha of gurudom continues.

This need not surprise us. What should surprise us instead is the eager readiness of individuals, even highly educated ones, to surrender themselves to the conmen of religion. Con men thrive under the garb of religion when people abandon God. The godmen symdrome is a symptom of godlessness, not of religiosity. Godmen have as much to do with God as rock gardens have to do with flowers.

Why do people flee from God to godmen? Why do they stick even to those con men who are fleeing from the arms of law? Why doesn't the grotesque pathos of it move the rest of us to tears? Where have we misplaced our capacity for righteous indignation?

The answer may well be found in Gandhiji's warning cited above. This could well be the punishment that an 'age of unbelief' invites upon itself. The necessary outcome of 'unbelief' is not atheism. It is cultism. It is not no-faith, but false-faith. The choice is not between trusting and not trusting God. The choice is between trusting God and surrendering oneself to godmen. It is an epochal imperative therefore that cultic con men and bogus godmen mushroom and commandeer hysterically zealous following in such an age. This does not prove the greatness of individual con men or the worth of teachings they mouth. It proves the sickness of the age in which we live.

Gandhiji warned us a long time ago against 'accepting imperfect ones as gurus'. A guru, by definition, is vastly superior to his disciples. Else the guru cannot command abject obedience and blind trust from those who cast themselves at his feet. By trusting these imperfect specimens of humanity, we degrade and consign ourselves to a level below that of their imperfection. Unwittingly, we invite irrationality, existential insecurity and a life driven and riven by falsehood, hypocrisy and moral anarchy. How else can the so-called followers of a godman now posture themselves aggressively against the arm of law?

At the popular level God is likely to lose out to godmen, given the spirit of this age of unbelief. God is a growth-imperative. Spirituality is all about our growth towards the fullness of our scope as human beings. God is the light in this pilgrimage of personal development and empowerment. Growth of this kind is a demanding, even daunting, prospect. Godmen provide the cheap, alluring alternative. You don't have to grow and assume responsibility for your destiny. All you have to do is abandon your life and destiny to the keeping of these men and women of clay. No godman or godwoman will ever ask you to outgrow your superstition or stupidity. As a matter of fact, human growth towards existential empowerment is bad news for godmen and godwomen. Growth eradicates the need to depend. It abolishes blind faith. Growth is the secret of freedom. God the Creator is also God the Liberator. In God alone, as all religions teach, are we truly free.

In contrast, godmen facilitate and perpetuate our disempowerment. They effect a sort of cultic slavery that conjures up, for the time being, a specious sort of security. A state of underdevelopment, however, is perforce riddled with anxieties and insecurities. It spews up a deep, irresistible craving to cast oneself upon a larger than life character who, one is eager to believe, has the solutions to all of one's problems. This also explains why so-called devotees volunteer to fight and protect their gurus from the consequences of misdeeds. Ironically, at this stage the protector becomes the protected! The masses become the saviour of their Saviour.

Historically, the godmen syndrome emerged in the wake of the failure of religious establishments. Predictably, it did not take long for wolves to appear on the landscape where naive lambs abounded as easy targets. But, given that it was the landscape of religiosity, wolves had to appear in sheep's clothing. The hybrid nature of this bogus phenomenon is reflected in the hybrid nature of the nomenclature they go by: god-men! Are they God? No. Are they men? No. Then what are they? An in-between phenomenon, haloed freaks. Going by the label, that is.

Following these cultic con men and women is, in the words of Gandhiji, like a man trying to learn 'swimming by tying a stone to his neck'. It is our sinking fellow human beings, rather than the thriving con men who tie these stones around their necks, who should be our crying concern. The stones are blind faith. The antidote to blind faith is true faith. God and God alone can be the centre of true faith. It should matter to all rational creatures - and matter a great deal - that wolves are being mistaken by millions for shepherds. Let this country gear up for a fitting tribute to the martyred Narendra Dabholkar.

Swami Agnivesh is president of World Council of Arya Samaj and Rev Valson Thampu is principal of St Stephen's College, Delhi.

Tributes

Thank you for sending me the latest issue of 'Thought & Action.' Narendra Dabholkar's dastardly killing will not go in vain. The seeds of reason and compassion that he sowed will yield a rich harvest. Our youth, and especially our women, will be more determined now to fight fascist forces wherever they rear their heads - from the 'ashrams, of self-styled god men to the cells of outfits of self-proclaimed advocates of religion, culture and nationalism. Regards,

Dileep Padgaonkar

If they think by shooting one of us they can stop the movement they are wrong – we shall fight harder. Salute to Narendra Dabholkar, a martyr to the cause.

Narendra Nayak, President of FIRA

Nirbhay bano! Lets fight ‘Censorship of Thought’. Be brave enough to Stand up against All Religious Terrorisms

Kunda Pramila Nilakanth, Activist:

Dabholkar comes in the tradition of those bold thinkers who tried to give greater meaning to human life. Rationalist like him do not assume that they have answers for all the questions that humans can and do ask. But where we do have answers, elegant and demonstrable, it is our responsibility to share this knowledge and convince others. Otherwise every easily explainable phenomenon can be turned into a mystery or miracle and become a powerful tool of exploitation.

The cumulative effects of such superstitious beliefs can build powerful organizations that not only exploit but also keep minds locked up in dark chambers of fear and hopelessness. This becomes fertile ground for fundamentalism, prejudice and hatred. It is one thing to ponder over, even cherish, our past beliefs and learn

how and why they evolved and shaped human cultures. But it is another to swear by them as infallible and everlasting truths.

We owe it to all people, especially the young to live in a world where the mind is free to explore without the constraints of imposed dogmas,blind faith and threat of any kind. Silencing a gentle soul like Dabholkar with an ultimate cruel act of violence deprives humanity of the light that a few bold persons are willing to spread on a path, dark and confused.

P.Dayanandan, Retd.Professor, Madras Christian College

I did not know Dr. Dabholkar personally, but of course I knew that he was reputed for his activism in highlighting the harmful effects of superstition, in particular the practising of barbaric acts and the brainwashing of gullible people by charlatans under the guise of ritual. In eliminating this brave spirit, the perpetrators have dealt a serious blow to the welfare of ordinary citizens by silencing a voice that spoke loudly and clearly in the cause of reason and rationality among human beings. This brutal and most reprehensible act will be condemned by all right-thinking people with a sense of morality. Remembering Dr.Dabholkar's message of reason and taking it to heart would be the best way of commemorating him and his noble cause.

V.Balakrishnan, Professor, IIT Madras

A great set back and irreparable loss to the world of science, reason and freethinking! Some four months back, I had a telecon with Mr. Dhabolkar. He was so enthusiastic about his future action plans and dreams, it made me feel as though I was speaking with a spirited youngster on his dreams!! Mr. Dhabolkar's relentless work among the needy masses, contributions to the realm of scientific thought and his endeavors to use law as a weapon to combat superstitions and blind belief will remain green in our hearts !!

Shridhar Prabhu, Lawyer

This fight will go on. As even in trying to eliminate the person who opposed the irrationality the irrational elements have had to resort to weapons of rationality (not a much-vaunted mantras and incantations of dark power but a bullet), it implies a victory: A resounding victory for rationalism. Every fighter of rationalism knows they carry this risk as it hurts the money, power and ascendancy acquired through corrupt means through crime against humanity. We are not afraid of that. What we are afraid of is leaving behind a world without the beacon of reason. Their ultimate sacrifice will give rise to more and more Narendra Dabholkars. We salute you and all that you have stood for in your active social life as a change agent and we unite ever so strongly to not to let your death go unrepented. The fight against irrationality will now be fought on more grounds and more fearlessly and fiercely than before.

P.K.Rath, President, Odisha Rationalist Society

A good and just man, a great human being, and one who was an inspiration to many has been cruelly snatched away by cowardly criminals who used assassination as argument.

It shows what a threat the gentle Dabholkar ji was to the forces of unreason. But the senselessness of it all – and the full implications of the calamity that has befallen us – will take time to sink in. How safe are the other officers of the Andha Shraddha Nirmulan Samiti?

That the Maharashtra Government rushed to issue today an Ordinance against the perpetrators of Black magic is a tragic success and an indication of the moral force Dhabolkar ji commanded in life and death. How are we to react to his refusal of police security saying his workers who do not have it would be exposed to danger if he was protected … the world is poorer for the loss of such nobility.

Dabholkarji's life and his martyrdom places him alongside the great fighters for human freedom who are up in the skies lighting up humanity's dark night with their star light.

With a heavy heart, and with no way of knowing how to console ourselves,

Babu Gogineni, Director, International Humanist and Ethical Union

We learnt with great shock and deep pain about the tragic assassination of Dr. Narendra Dabholkar, the leading rationalist of Maharashtra and India.

We did not have the privilege of meeting him personally but knew him since long through correspondence and exchange of journals. His work was and will continue to be a source of inspiration. We have been regularly receiving the electronic version of *Thought and Action,* founded by Dr. Narendra Dabholkar. In exchange we have been sending the electronic version of *Buddhiwadi,* our Hindi quarterly.

The July edition of Buddhiwadi is already in press. The next issue (October, 2013) will be dedicated to the memory of Dr. Narendra Dabholkar.

Ramendra and Kawljeet,

On behalf of Budhiwadi Samaj and Buddhiwadi Foundation

All India Peoples Science Network and scientists, science communicators, educators and organizers of the people's science movement who are gathered here at Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore for the All India Workshop on the 'Eyes on Comet ISON' public science communication campaign strongly condemn the dastardly murder of Dr. Narendra Dabholkar by terrorists today at Pune. It is known that Dr. Dabholkar had received constant threats to his life by terrorist organizations acting in the name of religion. He continued his work courageously, unmindful of these threats, spreading the scientific approach and exposing the fraudulent methods of babas, tantriks and self styled godmen. He was the founder and leader of the Andhashraddha Nirmulan Samiti and was the editor of the progressive magazine "Sadhana".

All of us gathered here take inspiration from the life of Dr. Narendra Dabholkar and pledge to carry forward his work and ideals of spreading the scientific temper, and opposing all forms of superstition and religious obscurantism . We pledge to combat the forces of communal fascism and terrorism acting in the name of religion which are active in different parts of our country today . We affirm the values of the Indian Constitution- of scientific temper, secularism, equality and democracy and will work to carry their message to every school, to every town and village of our country. Just as those who perpetrated the murder of Gandhiji could not stop his values and message , the values and message of Dr. Narendra Dabholkar will also not be stopped by this cowardly murder. All of us working in the people's science movement will work with greater determination and vigour to promote science and scientific thinking in the broadest sections of the public to win the battle of ideas and defeat the forces of obscurantism and communal fascism in our country.

T.Gangadharan

It was a real shock when I read about dr Dabholkar's death yesterday.

Vassant Shirvaikar

We lost great friend and he achieved the bill through his death

Innaiah

This occassion is very sad. I was shocked to here this yesterday and got the feeling of mourning much more stronger than I got when my grand father died two months ago.

The murder of Dr. Dabholkar needs to be condemned very strongly. I am wondering if my mourning is only about his death or is it about death of a more deeper something.

It seemed yesterday that something which has defined India - promotion of scientific temper has been killed.

This response may seem emotional, yes emotional it is, but what kept Dr. Dabholkar active in the moment was his strength, committment and conviction, all emotional traits, ofcourse they were backed by thought and action. Are not emotions necessary to do things against all odds?

Swati Vaidya

Dabholkarji's killing is a Sad and shocking news to every rational being in India. It gives us deep pain. It will severely damage the reputation of the country. It is a great loss to not only rational community but also to entire nation.
Let all people condemn the killing with louder voice. Long live scientific temper !

M. Nageswararao

Deeply pained, what a loss.

Arvind Gupta

I read the news of Dabholkar's murder in e-sakal. This is most shocking and also very tragic. I do not know what else one can do at such time but to share sorrow with friends who cared for the cause he so ardently espoused.

Madhukar Deshpande

This morning's Marathi Channels brought the shocking news of Dr. Dhabolkar. I felt extremely sorry. Medha Patkar made a significant statement " This shows what to expect when 'Saffron ;{HIndutwa} forces come to power.? All the youth must ask this same question.

Keshav Shet Revankar DUBAI.

When the morning turns dark

Suddenly there was darkness in the morning. The day of August 20, 2013 would go down as the blackest day in the enlightenment and reform history not only of supposedly and often proclaimed progressive Maharashtra but of the whole country. It was not only an attack on the person of Dr Narendra Dabholkar but more on what he symbolised and signified through his untiring missionary zeal and commitment for propagation of rational and scientific view of things. He was resolutely committed to enlighten people to adopt reason and scientific method in living. This was what our first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru had besieged us all to create a society with scientific temper.

I had known Dr Dabholkar for over two decades first through Visamata Nirmulan – inequality eradication and then Andhshradha Nirmulan – blind faith eradication. It appears he was stuck with eradication! He had inspired and built up a strong team of volunteers all over the state for carrying out the science popularization and rational opinion building programmes through lectures, workshops and demonstrations.
IUCAA had offered the group a mobile planetarium which was taken by the volunteers to every nook and corner of the rural Maharashtra. This was a great feat of Universe coming to their doorstep.

Besides his regulars he also had a battery of irregulars like me. I will suddenly get a call to go to Aurangabad or some place to give a lecture or some science programme in a school. Once Dr Lagoo (Dr Shriram Lagoo) jokingly told him that we were all his bonded labour. It was his sincerity and great commitment to the cause that glued people together.
We have lost our ablest and charismatic captain in the battle and we have long to go. He lived for a thought and its propagation. Person can be eliminated but not a thought. The question is to maintain and accelerate the momentum the movement had gained. That is what asks for greater resolve and commitment from all of us who formed his extended family of fellow travellers.

It was an attempt to extinguish the light of reason and rationality right in the morning. Untruth and blind faith that have no solid rational base fear reason and scientific method the most. Nothing could be more devastating than an argument going against you. The cowardice and impotent response to reason is violence – when you cannot win by argument and dialogue, you eliminate the source of reason itself – the person who questions. This was precisely what had happened to Dr Dabholkar when he went for his usual morning stroll on the fateful day.

The question is how do we respond to this wanton act of abject bestiality? This is the question we, all thinking people irrespective of whether science practitioners or not, have to address squarely with utmost seriousness and commitment. Science practitioners perhaps have a stronger responsibility because they should be employing scientific method for earning their living and hence it won't be too much to expect them also lead the way for adoption of scientific method in society at large.
Now is the time for us all to rise and say clearly and loudly in one voice that we all are Dabholkar. Let the battle lines be clearly drawn: Bullets versus Reason, and we all stand by Reason to face bullets. This resolve would be a true and apt tribute to our dearest friend who laid his life for the exalted ideal of creating an enlightened society that goes by reason and science.

Naresh Dadhich

(Naresh Dadhich is Emeritus Professor at The Inter-University Centre for Astronomy and Astrophysics, Pune. He is a theoretical physicist)

The press and the electronic media covered extensively about the dastardly act. Atheist Centre also conveyed the news to many important people immediately Atheist Centre issued a statement to the press. The English daily newspapers including the Hindu and also the regional Telugu dailies flashed the news prominently.

Leading Telugu daily Andhra Jyothi, CPM daily Prajasakthi and CPI daily Visalandhra and others have also written Editorials condemning the assassination of Dabholkarji. Yesterday, Aug. 28 the Hindu wrote the editorial, entitled "Faithful to a cause". It also published Sandhya Gokhale & Amul Palekar's article "Sorry Doctor, we didn't Deserve You" on page 9. Today's The Hindu published prominently news item of the British Humanist Association from London.

We have already published in the Telugu journal "Nasthika margam" (Sept. issue) a detailed article on Dabholakrji life and work and his contribution to society.

We are publishing detailed information on Dabholkarji in the September issue of our Atheist magazine.

Vijayam

(Atheist Centre)

I have uploaded a few of the speeches at a Nishedh/ Nirdhar sabha at goregaon. Perhaps u would like to share these with your friends.
I have never met DR ND but am familiar with his work. We will all miss him and those of u who worked closely

with him will miss him more. My heart goes out to u all.
This is a tough time but I am sure that the entire MANS family will continue to fight for the cause.

Sushma Samant

We have already condemned the gruesome killing of Mr. Narendra Dabholkar and raised protest against strangulation of progressive and democratic voices across the length and breadth of the country , also want to join your effort in the same direction . In this context we would like to know your assessment regarding actual intention of the assailants. We would like to know if you have issued any press statement or public declaration. Forwarding of the same would be highly appreciated.
Furthermore we appreciate your endeavor to enact anti-superstition bill in Maharashtra legislative assembly be like to get a copy of the same to consider its applicability in the state of Tripura.

Pradipta Roy
Secretary
TRIPURA YUKTIBAD BIKASH MANCHA.

This is to strongly condemn the killing of Dr. Dabholkar by the evil forces crippling India through ages.

I'm a Government Engineer willing to contribute your effort in eradicating superstitions. Pl. let me know how could I.

S. MALLIK
M.Tech, Executive Engineer,, PWD, GoWB

My condolences on the loss of your colleague and friend Dr. Narendra Dabholkar. If there is but a small consolation to this tragic event it's that it spreads awareness of your cause within your country and, as I can attest, around the world.
I would like to make a monetary donation to Maharashtra ANiS that would enable you to continue your important work. Please advise as to what you need and how I can help.

Nathan Battan
Minnesota, US

I am writing on behalf of the Sri Lanka Rationalist Association.
We are all deeply saddened by the murder of Dr. Dabholkar and wish to pass on our condolences to his family and his Rationalist colleagues and friends.Please be kind enough to pass this on.

Srilal Perera
Sri Lanka Rationalist Association

Cuttlefish

Narendra Dabholkar

His name's not familiar—not here in the states—
And we don't know the things he's said

But his work made him someone a fraud really hates
He was good; he was right; now he's dead.

Although the interwebs make it possible for us to peer in on the entire world (or nearly), we generally don't. It's strange; we are in an information age, where we could stream the news from virtually anywhere, we so often do not take advantage of that. We are still creatures of our local communities (sometimes literal and geographically defined, sometimes virtual and defined by shared interests), and when something seismically huge happens just outside of our (real or virtual) field of vision, a world that waits at our fingertips might just as well be on the other side of the world. Which, in a pre-internet world… it is.

Narendra Dabholkar has been assassinated. In a technological age where I could know who he is… I mostly don't. I remember hearing about his death, thinking it tragic… and, yeah, moving on. But the thing is, Dabholkar was a giant. He was known by millions… just not in the US. His assassination, for saying things I take for granted I can write any day, would be on par with the killing of any of the top tier names in atheism here… but he's not here.

Anyway. Go read Greta's piece on his life and his death. Please. Because you live in a world where it is possible to be moved by great people anywhere. And because all the good we can glean from a world of information at our fingertips is tempered by the knowledge that someone who thinks as we do… was killed for what he thought, and was bold enough to act on.

I just wish I had heard of him long before… and I have to wonder, who am I missing out on right now, that our technology gives me access to, and that bigotry, hatred and ignorance will steal from me before I have the opportunity to read?

sigh

Go read Greta's piece **.**

Alter Net

A Martyr of Modern Skepticism:

The Assasination of Prominent Atheist Narendra Dabholkar

Greta Christina

This incident is not a random outlier, and it does not come out of thin air.

A great skeptical leader has been assassinated.

This didn't happen in a tyrannical theocracy. This happened in a modern, supposedly secular nation, with no state religion, and with first-class programs of science and medicine.

And still, for the crime of criticizing religious beliefs, questioning them, and subjecting them to scientific scrutiny, a great skeptical leader was gunned down on the street in broad daylight.

For over two decades, Dr. Narendra Dabholkar dedicated his life to overcoming superstition in India. Originally a medical doctor, Dabholkar spent years exposing religious charlatans, quacks, frauds, purveyors of "miracle cures," and other con artists preying on gullibility, desperation, and trust. An activist against caste discrimination

in India, and an advocate for women's rights and environmentalism, Dabholkar's commitment to social justice was expansive and enduring. But it was his work against superstition that earned him his fame.

India is a huge, hugely diverse country, and much of it -- particularly the south -- is thoroughly modern, urban, and largely secular. But much of the country -- particularly the north -- is saturated with self-proclaimed sorcerers, faith healers, fortune tellers, psychics, gurus, godmen, and other spiritual profiteers. In parts of the country, people are beaten, mutilated ormurdered for being suspected of witchcraft, and there are even rare cases of human sacrifice-- including the sacrifice of children -- in rituals meant to appease the gods.

Throughout this country, Dabholkar traveled to towns and villages, investigating claims of miracles and magic, revealing the physical reality behind the tricks -- and organizing travelling troops of activists to do the same. He didn't try to persuade people out of the very idea of religious belief, but he was an open atheist, proud and unapologetic. He was the founder of the Committee for Eradication of Superstition in Maharashtra (Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti). He fought for years for the passage of a controversial anti-black-magic bill in India.

And it was his work against superstition that almost certainly cost him his life. On August 20, at seven in the morning during his morning walk, two men ran up to him on the street, shot him four times, and drove off on motorbikes that had been parked nearby. He was 67. As of this writing, there has been one arrest made in the case -- Sandeep Shinde, a member of the hard-line right-wing Hindu organization Sanatan Sanstha.

A little background on Sanatan Sanstha. They are repeatedly referred to by the Times of India as "right-wing Hindu organization, Sanatan Sanstha." In 2011, two of its members were convicted of the 2008 bombings of two theaters -- bombings that were committed "because the movie and the play showed Hindu gods in a bad light." (Four other group members were also arrested for the bombings, but were not convicted.) Their literature speaks of converting India into a divine kingdom ruled by themselves, and of "destroying evil by all means, even by laying down one's life." Sanal Edamaruku, another experienced debunker of superstition in India (and a longtime friend and colleague of Dr. Dabholkar), described them to me as "a fanatic (or rightly, fundamentalist) Hindu group."

The organization is a strange blend: a fringe extremist group that nevertheless wields significant cultural influence, like a mashup of Operation Rescue and the Catholic League. As atheist/ skeptical activist and blogger Avicenna (from the A Million Gods blog) commented, "Sanatan are basically one of the many organisations of 'Hindu Supremacy.' They are generally called Saffron Terror in India." At the same time, Avicenna noted, "they often shut down any movie considered progressive" -- with the result being that "Indian movies have actually gotten more and more conservative." But despite the influence that they wield, a campaign to ban the group has been seriously considered by the Indian government -- despite the strong religious sentiment in the country, and despite the country's commitment to freedom of religion, even at the cost of giving religious charlatans free rein.

And when Dabholkar was murdered, Sanatan Sanstha responded by saying that his murder was deserved: that "everybody gets the fruit of their karma," and that "instead of dying bedridden through illness, or after some surgery, such a death for Dabholkar is a blessing of the almighty." (Note: As of this writing, the Sanatan Sanstha website has been "shut down for some days" -- supposedly due to "technical problems.")

A member of Sanatan Sanstha has been arrested for Dabholkar's murder. But an arrest is not a conviction: the investigation is still in its early stages. And Dabholkar had many enemies. Faith healing, fortune-telling, miracle potions, the promise of intercession with the gods, and the sale of charms, amulets, and other supposedly magical trinkets are all Indian Mythbusters are hardcore.") He had received threats from multiple right-wing Hindu groups, and had even been beaten by followers of gurus whose "work" he had debunked.

It would be easy to dismiss the assassination of Dabholkar as an anomaly, a freakish act of a freakish fringe group, with no more cultural or political significance than any other senseless murder. But this incident is not a random outlier, and it does not come out of thin air. Overt hostility to any questioning of religious and spiritual belief is all too common in India -- to the point where it even gets enforced by the law.

Popular skeptical debunker Sanal Edamaruku has been in exile from India for over a year -- charged, literally, with the crime of blasphemy. Author and translator Matcha Laxmaiah (Krantikar) was arrested several years ago, under the same blasphemy law, for translating some of the works of Salman Rushdie, Taslima Nasreen, and other critics of Islam. And in November of 2012, Shaheen Dhada and Renu Srinivasan were arrested, again under this same blasphemy law, for criticizing the shutdown of Mumbai during a Hindu leader's funeral.

This is not an anomaly. Yes, it is an extreme act, and it is being widely condemned around India. But it is not an insignificant anomaly -- any more than the murder of abortion doctors in the United States.

And if you're in the United States, and you're thinking this could never happen here? Think again. The parallels between India and the United States are eerie. Both are modern states, world leaders in science and medicine. Both are secular states -- in theory. In practice, both have serious problems with separation between government and religion, and government endorsement of religion on both small and large scales are commonplace. Both are large, hugely diverse countries, with cultural divides showing up along geographic ones: both have regions that are more prosperous, technological, educated, and secular... and regions that are more steeped in poverty, more rural, less educated, and more religious. Both have cultures deeply entrenched in religious and spiritual belief... cultures which, much of the time, are actively hostile to established scientific thought, and indeed to the very idea of science and the scientific examination of religious or spiritual claims. Yet at the same time -- and probably not coincidentally -- both have rapidly rising rates of religious non-belief, with active, vibrant skeptical and atheist communities that are growing more visible by leaps and bounds.

So it's not surprising to find both countries deeply involved in a culture war about religion. Not a war between competing religions, but between religion and the lack thereof: between religion and those willing to criticize it, question it, scrutinize it, demand that it show evidence for its claims, and expose its more blatant frauds to the cold light of day.

Narendra Dabholkar is not the first martyr of atheism, skepticism or secularism. In 1600, Giordano Bruno was burned at the stake for arguing, among other things, that the sun was just one star among many; in 1697, Thomas Aikenhead was hanged in public in Scotland for stating privately to friends that he thought the Bible stories were fables. Dabholkar is not even the first martyr of the modern-era atheist and skeptical movement: earlier this year, four people were killed and over 200 injured in anti-atheist riots in Bangladesh, and atheist blogger Rajib Haider was brutally murdered in Bangladesh for criticizing Islam and advocating secular government. But he is almost certainly, by far, the most prominent public figure in the modern skeptical movement to be assassinated.

Narendra Dabholkar is not the first, but let us hope he is the last. And we should not simply hope for this – or pray, or consult fortune tellers, or purchase amulets that we're told wil ward off assassination. We need to work to create a world where this will never happen again.